

TRAIN WRECK 1929

TWO MILES WEST OF PETOSKEY

PETOSKEY, EMMET COUNTY, MICHIGAN

TWO KILLED IN P. M. TRAIN CRASH

WORST WRECK IN HISORY OF PETOSKEY DIVISION WHEN FREIGHTS MEET HEADON. Fatal Smashup Occurs Two Miles West of City At About Six O'clock Last Night Dead Were Veteran Employees

In the worst wreck in the Petoskey section on the Pere Marquette railroad, and the first smashup in which anyone was killed in many years for this part of the P.M., two veteran trainmen lost their lives last night. The northbound local freight and a southbound engine and caboose met head-on at a sharp curve, about two miles west of the city, the northbound run being on the way down quite a sharp grade. Charles E. Markham, for forty-three years a Pere Marquette employee, was killed almost instantly as was head break man, Henry DeFerre, who has been making the Petoskey run almost constantly for the last quarter century. Both were on the local and caught when they attempted to jump as the trains crashed with terrible force. The cab, tender and first car on the local were literally ground to splinters and twisted, broken steel.

The wreckage caught fire quickly and the Petoskey City fire Department had to use its chemicals on the blaze and water to cool the hot steel before torches could be brought into play to cut away the debris and free the bodies. Other members of the crew of the freight escaped serious hurts. The crew of the southbound outfit were all hurt, but none of them seriously. They were taken to Petoskey hospital. The crew was made up of Engineer Frank Mertas, Conductor Henry Ely, Bread-man Peter Wilkins, and Theodore Sherwood. The Traverse City wrecking crew was called and is clearing away the smashed engines, hoping to have the tracks cleared by late afternoon today.

Thomas Brown, fireman on the incoming freight, was down on the cab floor or tender floor, when Engineer Markham saw the south-bound engine and yelled "Jump." He leaped out on the north side of the track and rolled quite some distance, being badly bruised and cut up and also breaking a wrist. Markham and DeFerre were caught as they tried to escape, one on each side of the cab and were badly crushed and probably instantly killed. Escaping steam scalded their bodies and the fire which broke out in the wreckage almost immediately, burned them badly.

It was some time after the wreck before the work of rescue could start, owing to the flames and heat. The wreckage was then cut away and the bodies removed, that of Engineer Markham to the Henika undertaking parlors and that of Mr. DeFerre to Stone's undertaking parlors. The injured men were taken in ambulances to Petoskey hospital. Brown had his hurts patched up and returned to the scene but the other four were apparently worse hurt and were still at the hospital this forenoon.

It was said in railroad circles that two investigations likely would be conducted at once, one by federal and the other by state officials. The railroad also will make its own in inquiry.

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Coroner G. W. Nihart said this forenoon he had questioned the trainmen and investigated the wreck, and that he did not believe an inquest would be necessary. He explained that he believed the blame for the wreck would be placed on the crew of the southbound freight, stating that his investigation had led him to believe they left the local yards ahead of time stated in their orders. Should any other action be necessary, Dr. Nihart said this forenoon, it would be started by Prosecutor Washburne, or by the state or federal government or the railroad themselves.

The impact of the collision was so heavy that it knocked the southbound outfit back fully fifty feet from the point where the engines met. The two great engines were badly demolished, particularly that of the local freight.

The pilot steel of the engines was broken like wooden splinters and scattered about the scene. The heads of the engines were hammered in and the wheels and rods twisted and broken. The cab of the southbound engine was wrecked, but not so badly as was that of the local freight.

The news of the wreck flew like wildfire and within a short time cars began flashing to the scene. Hundreds of cars carried many people there and all night they tramped about the scene. The early comers aided railroad men in taking the injured to hospitals and in cutting away wreckage to get free the bodies of the two victims.

The body of Henry DeFerre was taken back to Traverse City last night by a brother, John DeFerre, of Traverse. The funeral and burial likely will be held there. The trainman was one of the most popular Pere Marquette crew members running into Petoskey. He was jolly, good natured and liked by hundreds who knew him. He had been making runs here for the last 25 years. Surviving him are the wife, Mrs. Edna DeFerre and one son, Leo DeFerre, a Michigan Bell Telephone company employee. He was born in Macomb County, Michigan, May 14, 1878, and married in Traverse City in 1902. A brother, Edmund DeFerre is said to have been killed in a similar train wreck near Thompsonville, Michigan, eighteen years ago with Engineer Markham in charge of the engine at that time. He had been serving as conductor during the rush of the season, friends say, and this was his first run back to Petoskey as a head brakeman on the local.

The body of Mr. Markham was to be taken to Traverse City today for a Masonic funeral Monday. Mrs. Markham came this morning to accompany the body home. He was 58 years of age and had been with the railroad for the last forty-three years. Surviving besides the widow are three sons. The watch the engineer was wearing stopped at 4:56 p.m., Central Standard time, showing the minute at which the engineer was crushed in the wreckage.

Another wrecking crew arrived during the night after a fast run from Grand Rapids and during today the two crews have been busy clearing away the debris. The rear cars on the freight were hauled back to the cement plant siding and the workmen then began work on the smashed freight cars. At 9 o'clock they had this about finished and were to start removing the engine of the local freight. This constituted the worst part of the job. It was believed that the southbound light engine could be hauled to a siding with out great difficulty. Trainmen said that the track likely would be cleared by late afternoon in time for the passenger trains to get out and in.

Extracted from Petoskey Evening News dated Saturday, September 28, 1929 page 1 and 2.

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
PERE MARQUETTE RAILWAY NEAR PETOSKEY, MICH., ON
SEPTEMBER 27, 1929

January 23, 1930

To the Commission:

On September 27, 1929, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the Pere Marquette Railway, near Petoskey, Mich., which resulted in the death of two employees and the injury of six employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on Sub-Division 6 of the Chicago-Petoskey Division, which extends between Boardman and Bay View, Mich., a distance of 79.02 miles, and is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at a point approximately 2 miles south of Petoskey, approaching this point from the north there is a 4° curve to the right 1,026.3 feet in length, from which point the track is tangent for a distance of 442.2 feet, followed by a 3° curve to the left 812.5 feet in length, the accident occurring on the last mentioned curve at a point 261.5 feet from its northern end. Approaching from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 2,627 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade at the point of accident is 0.4 per cent ascending for southbound trains. Owing to an embankment on the inside of the curve on which the accident occurred, the view had by engine crews of southbound trains is restricted to about 520 feet and that of northbound trains is limited to about 610 feet.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 4.56 p.m.

Description

Southbound engine 282, hauling a caboose, was running as an extra train and was in charge of Conductor Ely and Engineman Mertes. At Petoskey, 0.99 mile south

main track, waited until the brakeman closed the switch, and then continued southward without noting the time of departure. He estimated the speed of his train at 25 miles per hour as it approached the point of accident and when he saw the approaching train, he shut off steam but did not remember whether he applied the brakes. After the accident he looked at his watch and it was then 4.58 p.m., but his watch was 20 seconds slow. Engineman Mertes further stated that although both he and the conductor read the order to each other at the time it was delivered to him, he failed to remember that it required his train to wait at Petoskey until 5 p.m., and at Lamson until 5.40 p.m.

Fireman Weaver, of extra 282, stated that he read and understood train order No. 247 before leaving Petoskey. He did not know at what time his train departed from that point, but about one or two minutes after train No. 1 passed, the head brakeman opened the main line switch and gave them a proceed signal. Fireman Weaver then started working on the fire and continued to do so until just before the collision occurred; when the engineman applied the brakes, the fireman jumped from the gangway of the engine. Immediately after the accident he looked at his watch and saw that it was 4.56.30, but he was not certain that this time was entirely correct as he had not compared his watch with a standard clock before departing, and had not compared it with any member of the crew. He also said he did not know whether the conductor and engineman had read the order involved, but that when he read it he remarked "five o'clock Petoskey and 5.40 Lamson," no mention of the order was made en route.

Head Brakeman Wilkins, of extra 282, read the orders before his train entered the main track at Petoskey and understood they were required to wait at that point until 5 p.m. After the arrival of train No. 1, he was instructed by the engineman to open the main track switch, he complied with these instructions, closed the switch after the train was on the main track, and then gave a proceed signal, after which he boarded the caboose. He did not remember of anything being said concerning the wait order after leaving Petoskey, and said he was riding in the cupola of the caboose as the train approached the point of accident and that on account of his position on the outside of the curve he did not see the opposing train. Head Brakeman Wilkins was aware that train No. 1 was due at Petoskey at 4.55 p.m., but did not know at what time it arrived on the day of the accident and he failed

freight trains to follow passenger trains with caution after the expiration of 10 minutes, and that under this rule his train should not have left Lamson until 4.57 p.m. He did not call the engineman's attention to it, but instead when the train was departing, he remarked to the engineman that the time was very short and they would have to hurry.

Conductor Dobson, of extra 372, stated that before starting on this trip, he and the engineman compared time with a standard clock. Train No. 1 passed him at Lamson at 4.47 p.m., and his own train left that point at 4.52 p.m., which allowed them eight minutes in which to reach Petoskey on the wait order for extra 282. The accident occurred at 4.56 p.m., and shortly after its occurrence he compared watches with Engineman Mercedes and Fireman Brown and it was then 4.58 p.m. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the accident at 25 miles per hour. Conductor Dobson also knew that under the rules, freight trains on the Petoskey Division are not permitted to follow passenger trains until the expiration of 10 minutes, but took no action to see that this rule was complied with.

Rear Brakeman Price, of extra 372, stated that although he had read train order No. 247, he paid no particular attention to the time at which train No. 1 passed Lamson or the time at which his own train departed from that point, but was of the opinion they had ample time in which to reach Petoskey and comply with the wait order. The rear brakeman was riding in the caboose when the collision occurred and the shock caused him to be thrown, but as soon as he regained his feet he noted the time as 4.57 p.m., he was not certain as to the speed of his train at the time of the accident, but thought it was between 20 and 30 miles per hour.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by failure to obey a wait order, for which the entire crew of extra 282 is responsible.

The evidence indicates that train order No. 247, requiring extra 282 to wait at Petoskey until 5 p.m., was received and read by all members of the crew of extra 282. Shortly after northbound train No. 1 passed through the south end of the yard, extra 282 pulled out

Hayes Twp. balladeer captures Petoskey train wreck in song

"Then was heard the crash like thunder, that echoed through the air,

And the sounds of death were floating, like a music of despair.

Men were taken to the Master, on that greatest railroad line,

Now when these engineers depart, they'll always be on time."

— by Bert Southwood Jr.

By **BOB CLOCK**

News-Review staff writer

Trains — and train wrecks — have long provided inspiration for American ballads, from "Casey Jones" to "The Wabash Cannonball."

Petoskey's only fatal train wreck, which took place 61 years ago today, has been largely forgotten.

Until now.

Composer and guitarist Bert Southwood Jr. of Hayes Township has written a ballad about the wreck which is being introduced today on radio station WLTO at Harbor Springs. It is entitled "The Local's Final Run." It is one of three cuts on an album being released in October by Producers Tape Service in Troy, Mich.

Southwood, 44, a Chapter I remedial teacher at the Pellston Elementary School, wrote the ballad because he comes from a railroading family and thought the Petoskey train wreck, which claimed two lives, deserved to be remembered.

At the time of the accident Sept. 27, 1929, Southwood's father, the late Bert Sr., was a section hand for the Pere Marquette Railroad and his mother served meals to railroad men at her home on Water Street in Petoskey.

The accident, which was reported in the Saturday, Sept. 28, 1929, edition of the Petoskey Evening News, happened when a freight train called the Local, traveling from Charlevoix, encountered another freight train called the Stonerun, westbound from Petoskey.

According to the newspaper report, the Stonerun apparently left Petoskey ahead of schedule. About two miles west of the city, the Stonerun entered a sharp curve just down the bluff from the present site of H & D Inc. At the same time the Local was roaring down a grade into the same curve on the same track.

The engineers barely caught sight of each other when the trains collided with a deafening crash.



Bert Southwood Jr.

The two fatalities were in the cab of the Local engine — engineer Charles E. Markham, a 43-year employee of the Pere Marquette Railroad, and head brakeman Henry DeFerre, who had been on the same run for 25 years.

When Markham saw a crash was inevitable he yelled, "Jump."

Fireman Thomas Brown was on the floor of the cab or in the coal tender, immediately behind. Brown heard the warning and jumped out of the north side of the train. He rolled a considerable distance, suffering bruises and a broken wrist.

Markham and DeFerre weren't so lucky. They both jumped — one out of each side of the cab — but the impact apparently caught them in mid-air. They were trapped in the wreckage and their bodies were badly scalded when live steam lines ruptured.

The engine then caught fire and burned fiercely until the Petoskey Fire Department arrived and doused the flames with chemicals. The twisted metal then had to be cooled with water so that the bodies could be freed by rescue workers equipped with torches.

"The cab, tender and first car on the Local were literally ground to splinters and twisted, broken steel," The Evening News reported.

The crew of the Stonerun fared better than the crew of the Local. All were injured and hospitalized overnight, but they survived. At the throttle of the Stonerun was engineer Frank Mertes, accompanied by conductor Henry Ely, brakeman Peter Wilkins and Theodore Sherwood.

A native of Petoskey, Southwood says that the railroads are part of American culture and he is sorry to see the rails being pulled in the Petoskey area.

The balladeer graduated from Petoskey High School in 1964 and Central Michigan University in 1973.

He said he has played the guitar since acquiring a Gibson "Hummingbird" in high school. Country singers Hank Snow and Jimmy Rogers have been his biggest inspiration.

"The Local's Final Run" was taped and orchestrated at Bollinger's Playtown Sound Production in Petoskey, with background vocals by Kelly Nolf.

Other songs on the album are "Roxanna Lee" and "Where Do Lovin' Feelings Go."

Southwood and his wife, Leanna, have two daughters, Tammy, 24, and Lorelei, 21.