

"The Death of Engineer Rumsput"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The remarkable history of railroading in America is liberally sprinkled with great accomplishments and minor and major accidents. In the early days many accidents were due to faulty equipment, human error or both as railroad men learned to build better engines and cars. The Western Maryland Railroad experienced its first fatal accident in October 1876. The story was reported in the October 25, 1876 issue of The People's Voice newspaper published in Union Bridge:

"About 2 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon engine No. 4, on the Western Maryland Railroad, and in service with the gravel train exploded at the tank at Mr. Daniel Lightner's Ice Cream Factory, and was completely wrecked. The engineer, John Rumsput, was instantly killed; the fireman, George Carr, was seriously hurt, and David Winter, a repair hand received an ugly gash in the face. The engine had just been brought from the shop, where it had been under repairs, and was run to the fatal spot for the purpose of receiving coal. The task had been completed, and the engineer's hand was upon the throttle ready to move her, when the fireman heard a sound at the boiler which gave him apprehension of danger, and called the attention of the engineer, who thrust his head out of the window. In the meantime the fireman was about to step off the engine, where with a report that could have been heard for miles, the boiler exploded into a thousand fragments. The report shook every house in the town, and created a general consternation. It shook houses over a mile distant. Liket lightning the news spread and before scarce a minute had elapsed, a number of persons were at the spot. The engineer was found in the rear of the tender. When picked up he was already dead, his neck having been broken. The fireman made a miraculous escape. An instant after the explosion he found himself under a pile of coal. He immediately rose to his feet and ran for the field. Seeing the danger over, he started to walk down the track towards the shop, when he was met by friends, who picked him up and carried him to the engine house.

Drs. Maynard and Dehoff were sent for, and dressed his wounds. He had received an ugly, but not dangerous gash in the back of the head, and his neck was badly scalded. He received other injuries slight in their character. Mr. Winter was on the gondola next to the tender at the time of the accident. His injury is not at all serious. He was taken in a buggy and conveyed to his home in the country. Poor Rumsput's body was conveyed to town on one of the gondolas. It presented a most horrible sight, his face being covered with a mixture of blood and coal dust. Besides his neck being broken, his right arm was shattered in several places, and the right side of his face was horribly mangled. Some of the pieces had penetrated his skull in several places, either of which would have been sufficient to kill him instantly. He was taken into the workshop, where the dust and blood were washed from his face, and he was laid out to await the coroner's investigation."

The newspaper article continued with a description of the coroner's inquest and concluded: "...the deceased came to his death by the explosion of the engine, which was produced by an over pressure of steam, or by some other agency unknown." The jurors also concluded that they could find no fault with the railroad employees and also stated, "It was one of those mysteries which will never be explained." Following the inquest Rumsput's body was placed in a coffin and conveyed to the residence of his father-in-law, Jacob Singer, in Uniontown. Engineer Rumsput was survived by a wife and four children who apparently received no compensation for his death.

The tragic article provide a clear picture of how an accidental death was handled in the late nineteenth century. The inquest was handled by local men and when the cause of death was deemed accidental,

there was no investigation by any other governmental agency. The body was removed to a family residence and mourning took place in the home. The graphic description of the death of engineer Rumpsturt may seem out of place but was not at all uncommon. The article is a typical example of how Victorian society dealt with a tragic death in the community.

Photo caption: The Western Maryland railroad experienced its first fatal accident in 1876 when an engine similar to No. 28 shown here exploded killing the engineer. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.