

"Open Switch Caused Train Wreck in 1908"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The writer has occasionally written about mishaps and accidents that befell local travelers who ventured by horseback, carriage and train. During the era on horse drawn vehicles, accidents were frequent but rarely fatal. With the coming of the iron horse, serious accidents due to human error or faulty equipment became more common. Human error caused a near fatal train accident in April 1908 as reported in the April 10 issue of the American Sentinel newspaper, under the headline of "An Open Switch and a Collision.":

"As the train due in this city from Baltimore at 10:04 a.m. , was approaching the station on Monday it was diverted from the main track to the siding of the N. I. Gorsuch & Son Company's mill and warehouse by an open switch. The train was still running at a high rate of speed when the engineer, Mr. Edw. Snyder, who was watching the track intently discovered that the Gorsuch switch was open and that his train must, of necessity, turn into the siding. He immediately applied the airbrakes and thus in some measure checked the speed of the train before the engine collided with two box cars which were standing on the track. The momentum, however, was sufficient to smash the box cars into kindling wood and derail the engine, which tore up the track on both sides for a considerable distance. The pilot of the engine was demolished and the tender driven into the cab and wrecked. The engine was not badly damaged and about the only damage to the passenger coaches consisted in broken windows. None of the passengers was seriously injured but all were badly shaken up and some of them were severely bruised and sustained slight cuts. A Mr. Woltz, of Dickeyville, had his back badly sprained, the nose of Elder Wm. E. Rope, of Meadow Branch was cut and bruised and a colored man, whose name has not been ascertained, was hurt considerably. All three required the attention of a physician and were treated by Dr. L. K. Woodward. Mr. Frederick Himler, of this city, was returning from Baltimore, and was standing on the steps of a car when the collision occurred. He was hurled to the ground and stunned and bruised, but not badly hurt. The train was delayed upward of an hour and a half by the accident.

It seems a fortunate circumstance that the box cars were on the siding as the collision of the train with them served to stop its progress. At the head of the siding and fronting on West Main street is a small one-story frame building occupied by the C. and P. Telephone Company as an office. Several persons were in at the time and if the track of the siding had been unobstructed the train would certainly have crushed through it, probably with a fatal result to its occupants.

Engineer Snyder, who is a brother of Engineer Samuel Snyder who was killed in a collision on the road sometime ago, is to be credited with close attention to his duty. Having by watchfulness discovered the open switch at some distance before reaching it, he was able to check the momentum of the train to an appreciable degree and thus probably avoided a much more serious accident."

The accompanying post card photograph shows the damaged engine. The card was mailed to Master Edwin F. Shriver, a student at Charlotte Hall School in St. Mary's Co., by his mother. She wrote her son, "This will give you an Idea how #103 jammed into a freight filled with straw. Mr. Frank Cassell paid for this card for you Send him one and thank him. Mother" In keeping with the popular pastime of the day, Edwin glued the post card in an album.

Photo caption: Local residents inspect the wreckage of a Western Maryland Railroad Engine on April 6, 1908. The onlookers are identified as Charles Steffy, Mary Snader, Irma Shaw, Ruth Boen, Louise Eckenrode, Herbert Green, ----- Wood, Grace Ickhorn and Nellie Lippy. Historical Society of Carroll County Collection, gift of Edwin F. Shriver.