

# 1903 Pelham trolley crash . . .

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**The Great Pelham Trolley Crash: Six dead and 40 injured. Headlines decrying the trolley company's personnel; Shock, disbelief...**

1903 was a year in which...Panama gained its independence with a little assistance from the U.S.; Social Democrats met in London and formed into two groups, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks (the latter, to give birth to the Communist Party); Orville and Wilbur Wright made their historic flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; Congress created a Department of Commerce and Labor and made that agency's secretary a member of the President's cabinet. . .

...15,000 millworkers in the Lowell area returned to their jobs in June after a months-long strike in which they demanded a 10 per cent raise; Charles "Chief" Bender and Mordecai "Three-fingers" Brown began their illustrious pitching careers, while Pittsburgh's Honus Wagner took the National League Batting Crown with a nifty .355 average; Tallulah Bankhead was born down in ol' sweet South Alabam', Bob Hope was born in Etham, England, and Geogre Raft, Arthur Godfrey and, of all people, Minnesota Fats were born in New York City...

...a Danish scientist developed a treatment for skin diseases through the harnessing of concentrated light; a Swede originated the "ionization theory" that brought chemistry far along in understanding atomic phenomena; Antoine Becquerel discovered "spontaneous radiation," and the Curies, Madame Marie and Pierre, were studying the same.

AN INTERESTING year, 1903, but for some 90 people riding on the Hudson, Pelham and Salem Electric Roadway on Sunday, Sept. 6, at 11:15 in the morning, a year better forgotten.

It was at that time that two trolleys, one travelling at speeds approaching 60 miles per hour, the other at 30 m.p.h. and accelerating, collided a half-mile from Pelham center and brought about

what was then the worst trolley disaster ever in New England.

"Six lives lost....and 40 Injured," read the headlines afterwards "...in Terrific Trolley Disaster in Pelham, N.H..."

Indeed, two days later, The Lowell Sun was to state in an editorial, "this last, by far the worst of all (disaster), has shocked New England."

In a day and age such as ours, where airliner disasters mean hundreds of deaths, a trolley disaster might take on seemingly inconsequential import.

But to New Englanders then, people accustomed to ever-improving modes of transportation and who were heavily reliant upon electric trolleys for recreational and commuter transport, the crash was a "disaster."

Not that trolley crashes were uncommon.

The trade really wasn't as developed as it might have been. Most lines used a single track to convey passengers in both directions, with use of these tracks coordinated by track personnel and an electric signalling system.

EARLIER IN 1903, on another section of the trolley system that connected Haverhill, Lawrence, Lowell and Nashua, at a section known as Kent's Corner, two trolleys rammed into each other head-on. Nine people were injured, but none died. One newspaper described the calamity: "Women screamed and shouted while others were on the verge of fainting."

And the day after the Pelham wreck, in Wrentham, Mass., two trolleys also collided head-on. Four people were injured.

On Sept. 10, only four days later, a Hudson, Pelham and Salem Electric Roadway car, arriving in Nashua from Pelham, slammed into several cars destined for Lowell. No one was injured.

Which might lead one to assume trolleys were totally unsafe. Not so, as is evidenced by the great patronage trolleys enjoyed.

When Canobie Lake Park opened in Salem, N.H., one trolley car reported

150 people jammed into its 70-seat capacity confines. People paid nickel fares per each leg of the trip in those days.

The route used by the two trolleys involved in the infamous wreck ran east out of Nashua's Tremeont Square, through Hudson, dipped southerly as it entered northwest Pelham, ran to Pelham Center, then rose northeasterly as it travelled toward Salem's Main Street.

Power for the trolleys came from the Rockingham County Light and Power Co., in Portsmouth.

High tension lines carried 13,200 volts, which was later transformed to 600-volt current riding in the track wires overhead.

THE TROLLEY system was a consolidated effort, owned by three companies: The Hudson, Pelham and Salem Electric Roadway, the Lawrence and Methuen Street Railways and the Haverhill and Southern New Hampshire Co.

It was the Hudson, Pelham and Salem that operated the system, however. That one company owned some 30 miles of track at the time of the crash.

Power was converted to overhead line current at the Salem and Pelham substations.

The Pelham substation was housed in an el off the car barn in Pelham Center. Built by J.M. and C.J. Buckley Construction of Worcester, the barn was 105-ft. wide by 180-ft. deep, held eight tracks and had a capacity of 32 "double truck" cars.

An automatic sprinkler system drew its supply from a towering, 45-ft. high, 50,000 gallon water tank on the building's western side.

The car barn was built in 1902. The barn proper was razed during World War II, but the el still exists today. It is the St. Patrick's Parish Hall building to the east of town hall.

The trolley cars, built in Laconia, N H., were carmine-colored, with gold-leaf lettering and striping. Destinations and routes were displayed on four-

sided, rectangular wooden blocks. The blocks were located one each per trolley car side, and could be rotated when the destination was changed.

THERE WERE SOME 55 cars used on the consolidated New Hampshire Traction Co. lines, and 33 of them were "sporting," open cars.

Women and children would occupy the 14 rows of benches in an open car, while men, assuming the car was overcrowded, would stand on the running boards along each side.

A common prank youngsters might play on the conductor and motorman driving the car would be to disconnect the electrical connection atop the car.

When the trolley came to a stop, and the conductor departed to either change a directional switch in the tracks or to fritter away time while waiting for a tardy trolley to arrive and in so doing, clear the track, the mischievous youths might be found hoisting themselves up to reach the rope attached to the "broom-handle" electrical connection.

The conductor would then have to reconnect the apparatus in order to proceed with his route.

By far the most popular recreational spot became Canobie Lake Park, opened in 1902. With 56 acres of parkland, its direct access to the lake, its baseball diamonds, its Japanese Theatre, its penny arcades, its amusement rides and its dance hall, Canobie Lake was to become a lucrative operation. Later, it would play host to great all-time orchestras, such as Mal Hallett's, Rudy Vallee's and the Great White Fleet.

THE RIDE FROM Nashua to Salem was a pleasant one, judging by accounts of the New Hampshire Traction Co.'s brochures: "...crossing the Merrimack, the road winds through the primeval forest of pine and hemlock after passing Hudson, ascending a chain of foothills as rugged and primitive, as wild and grand as any of the horse-covered mounds that mark the approach to the Scottish Highlands and through panoramic vistas of far

# shocked New England

hills, and farmhouse centers until Pelham is reached... (Pelham, a pretty village in prosperous farming region)."

It was on this trip, en route to Canobie Lake, that Car 125 met Car 137 head-on at a heavily-wooded curve only a half-mile out of Pelham Center.

According to one historical account, Car 125, Canobie Lake-bound from Nashua, had 59 passengers on board, while Car 137 had only 30.

Four passengers were killed instantly, and two more died later of injuries sustained. One report lists an additional 12 people "maimed" — 60 were injured.

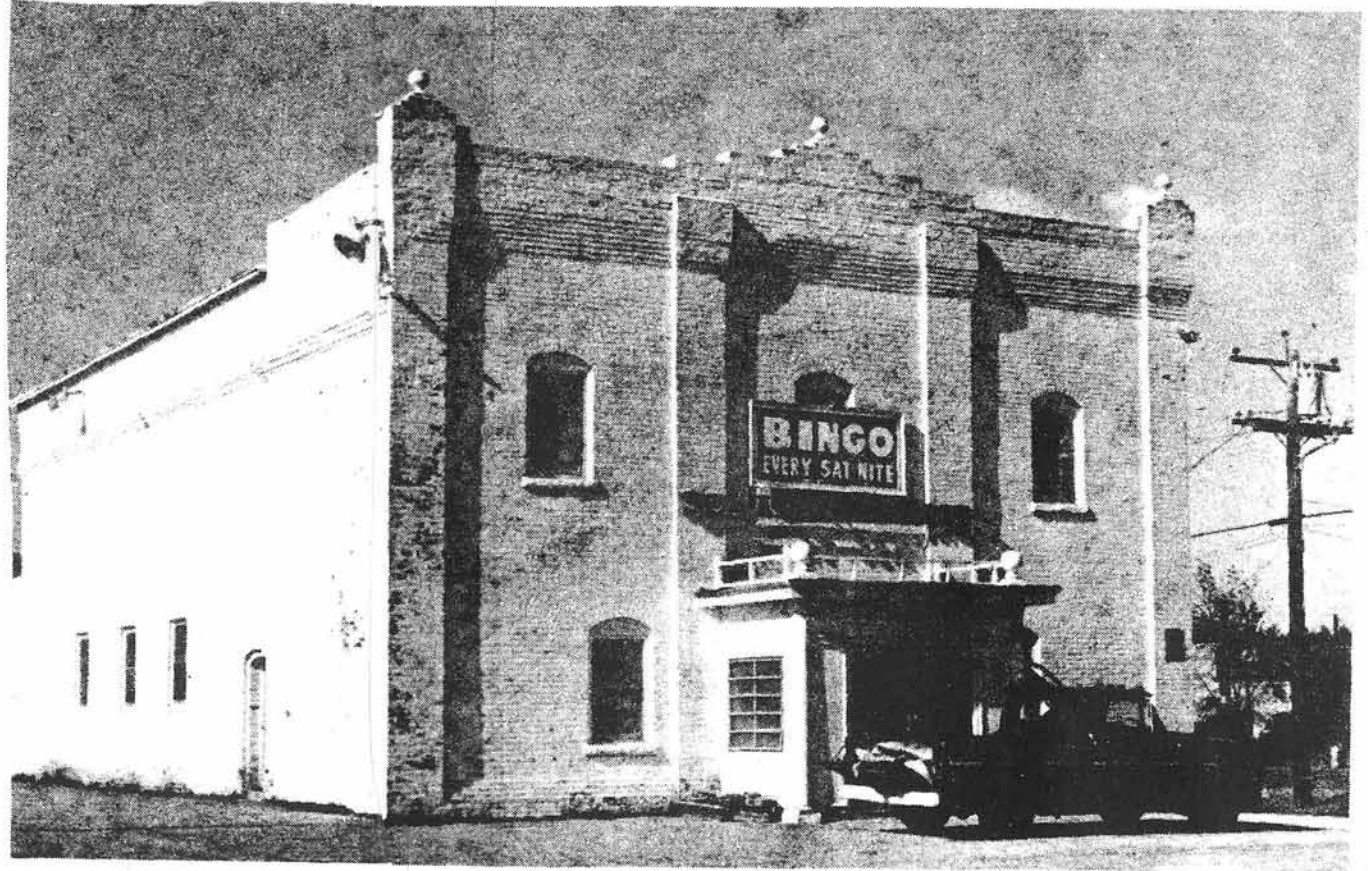
The crash, some 2,800 feet northwest of Pelham Center, was reportedly heard more than a mile away.

"The cars were smashed into kindling wood — the west-bound car mounted the other, lifting its fender and dasher, crushing the flooring and the first two or three seats and pushing them up on its own front," goes one account.

"...the crash that betokened the taking away of human life resounded through the woods and beat dismally upon the ears of those who heard it," read another, newspaper, account.

"**THE CRASH**, resembling the noise of an explosion, was followed by the groans of the dying and shrieks of the wounded," continued the dramatically gruesome account.

The circumstances leading to the crash are, according to contemporary accounts, assumed to be thus:



CARBARN TODAY IS ST. PATRICK'S PARISH HALL

That Pelham Center Foreman O.A. Stevens boarded Car 137 while waiting for the Nashua car, which was five minutes late; that Stevens stuffed a piece of newspaper into a crack in a window pane and, having done that, was deboarding the trolley and said something to Conductor Howard Fox.

It is believed that Fox misinterpreted whatever Stevens said to mean "go." Fox signalled motorman Pliny Knapp, of Pelham, who applied power and Car 137 left Pelham Station.

Stevens, who was reportedly "tired" due to an illness in the family the night before, realized what was happening and dispatched an assistant to the sub-station in the car barn to cut the power feeding the overhead lines — to no avail.

Car 137 was reaching a speed of "no less than 30 m.p.h." and collided full force with Car 125, doing nearly 60 m.p.h.. The former rode up on top of the latter's roof.

ANNIE COBB, A passenger on Car 137, later said she saw the motorman apply the brakes "just as quickly as he could, and so suddenly, that we were thrown from our seats. I think he did all

that he could possibly do. I saw the other car a few seconds before the collision occurred. I had time to take off my own glasses and my father's glasses and put them in his pocket..."

Ms. Cobb, daughter of a Bridge Street confectioner, suffered a badly bruised leg and blows to her forehead.

The Lowell Sun's interview with her the day after reported: "Ms. Cobb's...teeth are loose and she fears that she may lose them."

One reason the accident occurred was that verbal orders were being relied upon — a thunderstorm on Saturday night had disabled the starting block electrical system.

And there was the inherent risk of operating a two-direction line on a single track.

The print media came out strongly against the supposed neglect of the Hudson, Pelham and Salem Electric Roadway Company, decrying the lack of employe screening and training.

"For a head-on collision there can be no excuse..." wrote The Lowell Sun in an editorial two days later, "...the company deserves no sympathy because it has had one accident after another without adopting proper precautions for safety.

THE NEWSPAPER charged the company with hiring "employes dropped from other lines for various causes ranking under the general head of incompetency..."

"The company did not care for the trouble of training its men or even of testing their capacity before giving them positions on cars and as a result, one accident has followed on the heels

of another until this last, by far the worst of all, has shocked New England."

The New Hampshire Railroad Commissioners conducted an investigation and offered several recommendations to reduce the possibility of another fatal calamity: increase the running times between Pelham and Nashua, thereby reducing the need to travel at high speeds; clear away brush and trees near curves to afford a better view of the track ahead; and, place a speed restriction on travel on curves.

While how much the Hudson, Pelham and Salem Electric Roadway had to pay out in damage claims is unknown, it was apparently enough to send the

firm into receivership the following year.

In 1907, the company reorganized into the Hudson, Pelham and Salem Street Railway and in April of 1913, it was consolidated with the Mass. Northeastern Street Railway.

The 18-mile stretch between Salem and Nashua was abandoned for good on March 14, 1924.

While 1903 will be remembered for the Wright Brothers, Honus Wagner's batting average and the discovery of spontaneous radiation, New Englanders will soberly remember the Great Pelham Trolley Crash as a part of this area's heritage.

## She remembers . . .

She remembers. She wasn't involved with the calamity, the trolley crash heard up to a mile away, the injured being transported out, but she remembers.

May Sherburne, 89, remembers leaving the Congregational Church in Pelham Center and seeing the injured being brought from the scene.

A patron of the then two-year old trolley line, May says she was "horrified by the accident, the deaths. I saw

them being carried out...terrible, terrible."

Then 14, May travelled the line often with her sister, Blanche Hillman, now 91, who also remembers the trolleys.

"One time," recalled Blanche, "we spent all of our money at Canobie Lake Park and fortunately, we knew the conductor. He gave us a ride home and we paid him back."

Blanche did not see the accident or its aftermath.