

# The Great Nashville Wreck of 1918

## "That Mournful Sound"

**July 9, 1918**

The Union Station was crowded on the early Tuesday morning. Most railroad stations were, during World War I, transporting soldiers and workers to plants geared up for war. The Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis train No.4 was preparing for its trip toward Memphis.

Willis M. Farris, an honored Nashville citizen who made the lumber industry here famous the world over, went to take a seat. A young bookkeeper, seeing the older man, offered Farris his seat, which he graciously took in the crowded car.

At the same time, Robert D. Corbitt, the brakeman for the east-bound No.1 heading to Nashville from Memphis, decided for no particular reason to check out the rear of the train. That train was packed with passengers, many of them workers traveling to the DuPont plant in Old Hickory.

Among them was 18-year old George Scott, scared of the large, bustling crowd of strangers on his first trip away from home. He was headed to Nashville to play his part in the war effort, producing powder at DuPont.

An irritating vision kept awakening him on that night train from Memphis. Something horrible was going to happen. At 6 a.m. he left his seat and went to the passenger car behind his and, for no reason he could recall, he pulled the shade and waited.

The decisions made that morning would be played out for generations by survivors of the dead and descendents of the living.

### **Running late**

The veteran engineers on both these trains were running late that morning. Engineer David Kennedy pulled his No.4 out of Union Station at 7:07 a.m., seven minutes late, while No.1 was chugging in from the west, 35 minutes late.

No.1 had the right of way, so it was the trainmen of No.4 who had to keep a lookout for No.1 running past them on the double tracks heading into Union Station. If they didn't see No.1 before hitting a 10-mile stretch of single track west of the city's center, they must stop. Once passing that track fork, there was no going back.

As the trains rumbled forward, tower operator J.S. Johnson showed train No.4 a green sign from the tall, wooden tower, which meant all was clear. As he stopped to record it, "No.4 passed tower 7:15 a.m." his hand froze. He could find no entry that No.1 had passed. Johnson reported to the dispatcher, who telegraphed back. "He meets No.1 there, can you stop him?" Johnson blew the emergency whistle, but no one stood at the rear of doomed No.4 to hear it.

"Along about 6 that morning, something kept telling me that something bad was going to happen," Scott told Nashville songwriter Bobby Braddock in 1983. Braddock had become fascinated with the event on Dutchman's curve and interviewed survivors, such as Scott, on tape. "So about 6 that morning, I came out of that coach, into the front of this coach. Instead of leaning over trying to get a little rest, I pulled the shade down over the glass."

Train No.4 snaked around the curve, blind to what was ahead, as No.1 approached the White Bridge Road area. "He told me he was riding in the engine like he normally did," says Thomas Vester of Nashville, a nephew who was raised by Robert Corbitt, brakeman on No.1 that morning. "But he went to the rear of the train. Something just told him to go back there."

The end of the curve approached and the trains each chugged upwards at 60 miles per hour. A horrible sight appeared around the blind corner.

Two trains, one track.

Kennedy wildly pulled the brake lever. It was too late.

### **Oh my God!**

The two 80-ton engines met, causing an explosive sound heard two miles away. The ground quaked and the waters of nearby Richland Creek trembled. The wooden cars crumbled and hurled sideways, hanging over the embankment. One train telescoped the other. Scott was hurled across the train car. He got up shaken and saw people laying about, "blood running everywhere." "I had to raise up the window and the glass was falling all over everywhere," he said through sobs, "and finally I got out of there... And I wandered out past a cornfield, best I can remember, and I run across one of the trainmen laying there. Every time he was breathing, blood run out of his mouth. It done knocked me down ... It wasn't long and here come a truck full of 10 tubs to pick up the body parts. You couldn't tell one part of the bodies from another. They were just all cut to pieces."

Scott could barely be heard on Braddock's recorded tape as he described the fate of the young woman and child he saw across from the first train car. The woman's arm had been ripped off and had stuck into the baby. For the next three days he was in shock, walking around Nashville with blood covering his clothing.

Frank Fletcher heard the explosion from his home in West Nashville. The 14-year-old was summoned by his father to check out what had happened. Together they arrived early on the scene. Fletcher talks slowly over the telephone from his Nashville home, gathering up the memory of what happened next. His father ran down the bank to the wreck, while he stayed perched on the bridge.

"My father was horrified. He went down there and attempted to raise the car, to relieve some of the victims who were under pressure." Many were dead or dying. Willis Farris had died, and the young bookkeeper who surrendered his seat survived, according to Rachel Farris of Nashville, Willis Farris' granddaughter.

In the years to follow, the faces of those trapped in cars haunted many, including Fletcher. "One of the cars was standing at an angle. This man must have been standing in the door and all I could see was his legs hanging out the doorway," Fletcher says. "The other thing I remember was a hand pinched under the car. The man was stuck there with two dead men on his lap. He was hollering, 'Oh my God! Oh my God!' Nobody could do anything to help him."

Fletcher vomited and would look no more. Among the bodies was Robert Corbett, who lay motionless. "They took him to the morgue," says Vester, Corbett's nephew. "They were ready to embalm him. Then he moved."

Corbett was transported to the hospital swamped with the injured and near dying. Doctors were sent to cut his leg off. "But mama said it was better than no leg at all," Vester recalls. Corbett lived out his life working on the railroad until retirement. Doctors managed to fix his leg so he even walked without a limp. Only a metal plate in his head marked the wreck. He survived another train accident in 1951 by jumping from the train.

### **The aftermath**

As many as 50,000 "spectators" came to the track throughout that day, hearing the moans of the dying and watching horse-drawn "dead wagons" stacked with bodies head for overcrowded funeral homes. "Coffins", wrote the newspaper accounts then, were "stacked like cordwood."

The final death tolls are still disputed. Officially, the Interstate Commerce Commission, in those days the investigative body for railroad accidents, listed the dead at 101. At least as many were wounded. Embalmers, it was written, were brought in from surrounding towns. African-American family members from points west descended

on Nashville to find their loved ones. It was first reported that almost 80% of the victims were black workers from Memphis and Arkansas, crammed into the wooden cars, but that figure was later disputed as too large.

The catastrophe, the worst in U.S. railroad history, fell off the front page within three days. Some writers have since speculated that World War I was too dominant a story for much of the nation to bother over a train wreck. The question still remains: Just what happened?

ICC officials questioned railway workers afterward. The proceeding's notes were taken by the late Ernest Jones Sr., who supplied them to *The Tennessean* in 1983. Jones said the early morning confusion at the Union Station caused Kennedy to think train No.1 had passed, when it was simply another switch engine hauling empty cars. Kennedy was found at the wreck with the train scheduled folded under his body. William Floyd, the engineer of No.1, died on his last day before retirement.

Soldiers were found with notes to their mothers, and grandfathers with pictures of their grandchildren. The scattered letters from the mail car were sorted among bits of flesh and bone. Scott was sent back to Memphis with \$50 from the railroad. He never could remember the three days following the wreck. And he felt guilt over his survival while the little baby died.

Farris' sons received money from a settlement from the death of their father, whose body they carried up the railroad bank that day, in agony. Out of the bleak tragedy, one son's life course was changed. Frank Farris Sr., used his settlement as seed money to start Third National Bank, according to Frank Farris Jr., his son. Farris, Sr. became a leader in the banking business in the south, and the bank later merged with SunTrust Bank.

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