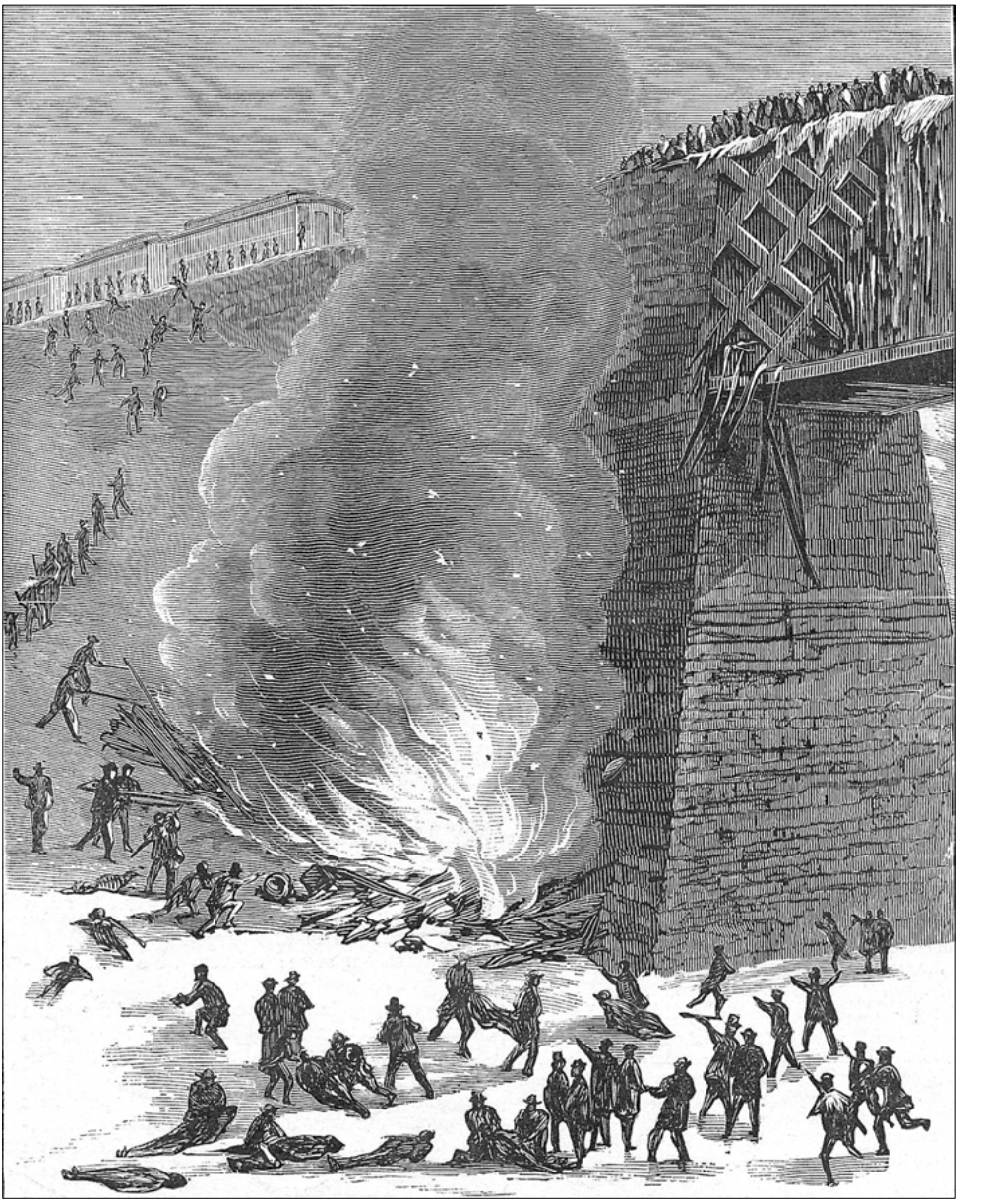
THE ANGOLA HORROR



The ANGOLA HORROR

The 1867 Train Wreck That Shocked the Nation and Transformed American Railroads

Charity Vogel

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TO MY PARENTS,

Michael and Stasia, who love words and ideas.

TO MY DAUGHTERS,

Mercy and Annabel, who love good stories.

AND, MOST OF ALL, TO MY HUSBAND,

Todd Joseph, who always knew, and who makes me better.

Ad majorem Dei gloriam

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Cast of Characters

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Frank E. Griffith—Civil War veteran and family man who lived near Big Sister Creek

Thankful Griffith—Wife of Frank E. Griffith

James Mahar—Switchman for the Buffalo and Erie Railroad in Angola

John Martin—Owner of Angola's tin shop

J. M. Newton—Angola's station agent for the Buffalo and Erie Railroad

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Josiah Southwick—Prosperous and well-respected Quaker farmer who served as justice of the peace in Angola

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Eliakim B. Forbush—Patent attorney returning home to Buffalo after winning a case in Cincinnati

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Arila Nichols—Wife of Norman Nichols and mother of a young daughter, traveling east with her husband for work

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Elam Porter—Lawyer traveling from Cincinnati, Ohio, toward his wedding in Massachusetts

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Amos H. Thomas—Coal dealer from Utica, New York, on his way home with his wife, Mary

Mary Thomas—Wife of Amos H. Thomas of Utica, traveling home with her husband

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Lydia Babcock—Woman from Syracuse, New York, traveling with her husband, Ira

Anna Chadeayne—Thirteen-year-old daughter of Mary and Daniel Chadeayne

Carry Chadeayne—Three-year-old daughter of Mary and Daniel Chadeayne

Mary Chadeayne—Mother traveling with two daughters, Anna and Carry; her husband, Daniel, was in Titusville, Pennsylvania

Robert J. Dickson—Buffalo resident and son of a prosperous Lake Erie ship captain who was traveling with a friend and colleague, J. Frank Walker

Alexander E. Fisher—Minnesota resident and owner of a stoneworks on his way to be married in Madrid, New York, over the Christmas holiday

Emma Hurlburt Fisher—Minnesota mother accompanying her brother-in-law Alexander to his Christmas wedding in New York State

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IN BUFFALO

Robert N. Brown—Superintendent of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad
John Desmond—Assistant superintendent of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad
Peter Emslie—Chief engineer of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad
William G. Fargo—Founder of the Wells, Fargo and American Express companies in Buffalo, New York, and codirector with Stephen W. Steward of a small upstate New York–Pennsylvania railroad
Levi Jerome—Baggage master for the Buffalo and Erie Railroad in the Exchange Street depot
Rev. John Chase Lord—Pastor of one of the city's largest and most prominent churches, Central Presbyterian
J. Harrison Mills—Civil War veteran and budding artist interested in newspaper journalism
John Nicholson—Captain with the Niagara Frontier Police
Dr. J. I. Richards—City coroner
Julius Walker—Well-to-do city businessman and father of J. Frank Walker
William Williams—President of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad

IN CLEVELAND

John Davison Rockefeller—Twenty-eight-year-old businessman with offices in New York City and Cleveland and a modest home on Cheshire Street in Cleveland

Laura Celestia Spelman Rockefeller—Wife of John D. Rockefeller

ELSEWHERE

Zuleann P. Aikin—Wife of Benjamin C. Aikin of Hydetown, Pennsylvania

Daniel Chadeayne—Family man in Titusville, Pennsylvania, whose wife and daughters were on board the New York Express

Clara Green—Fiancée of John W. Chapman in Massachusetts and former wife of the infamous Malden murderer Edward W. Green

William Green—Seventeen-year-old youth who claimed to have narrowly missed boarding the New York Express in Dunkirk

Andrew Fisher—Husband of Emma Fisher and father of Minnie Fisher in Owatonna, Minnesota

Anna Shaw Hayward—Young wife of Josiah P. Hayward, Buffalo and Erie station agent in State Line, Pennsylvania

Ellen McAndrews Hubbard—Wife of Canadian carpenter Zachariah Hubbard and mother of three children

Marcus "Brick" Pomeroy—Editor at the La Crosse, Wisconsin, newspaper with Charles Lobdell

George Westinghouse Jr.—Twenty-one-year-old mechanic and Civil War veteran living in Schenectady, New York

THE ANGOLA HORROR

PROLOGUE

America on the Rails

You can not tell what may happen when you go traveling on a train. It is not like starting out all together in a wagon.

Laura Ingalls Wilder,
By the Shores of Silver Lake

ANGOLA SHOOK the nation.

The derailment of an express train on December 18, 1867, in the little upstate New York village, an event in which about fifty people died—the number would never be known for certain—was so grisly a scene that it became branded in the national imagination as "the Horror." No other words were necessary.

Nearly ten years later, the Angola wreck retained its powerful place in the American mind. When a train careened off a bridge in Ashtabula, Ohio, in 1876, the engineer of the Pacific Express was said to have summoned up the previous disaster as the only way to understand the new incident. Thrown out of the window of his locomotive, the Columbia, as it tumbled into the Ashtabula River, the engineer was reported by his fellow trainmen to have muttered three words as he was pulled from a snow bank in a badly injured state: "Another Angola Horror."[1]

That might have happened. Then again, perhaps those words were a dramatic twist inserted by a newspaper reporter or editor in 1876. The newspaper industry—like journalism itself—was still taking shape in the era of the Angola wreck and developing into the form we know today. Raw, direct-from-the-scene coverage of news, and especially of tragedy, was prized enough that editors might take liberties with sequences of events, with the precise wording of quotations, with death tolls, so as to deliver to readers that unforgettable first-person experience. The dispatches and illustrations from Angola and

Buffalo in December 1867, which would appear in the nation's newspapers and magazines in the days and weeks to come, were maximized to provide a visceral sense of the devastating accident. Some audiences would learn of the wreck right away. Others would take weeks to hear of it. Mistakes would be made in the reporting of the wreck, and corrected—or not. In all cases, the brutality of Angola would be laid bare before the eyes of thousands of people, in gritty news accounts and illustrations. "Slaughter," the headlines would read. "Horror," they called it. One popular magazine with a national circulation ran a sketch of the dead victims of Angola, charred, mostly legless and armless, in a large-size picture on its front page.

That was one important reason the memory of Angola haunted the nation a decade later. The day's newspapers, and its oft-sensationalistic journalists, played a significant role in turning the scenes at Angola into indelible images and phrases. Extensive coverage was devoted to the wreck's grisliest details. Lengthy stories filled local newspapers and magazines from coast to coast for weeks in December 1867 and January 1868, and illustrations of scenes of the wreck—sparing no detail—appeared in such widely read national publications as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's* and *Kelley's* magazines. The wreck was described in newspapers in cities as far away as London. "There have been as many persons killed in a Railway Accident before," the *Times* of London observed shortly after the disaster, "but seldom have so many ghastly and appalling incidents been crowded into a catastrophe of the kind as at Angola."[2]

But newspapers could not manufacture the level of interest that Angola commanded. The timing of the wreck at Big Sister Creek, not far from Lake Erie, caught many Americans at a moment in which they were especially attuned to disaster, and keenly aware of the fragility of life. Angola happened just two and a half years after the end of the Civil War—a time in which people were readjusting to peacetime and civilian life, imagining themselves once again secure. Major railroad accidents of the postwar period shattered this uncertain, nascent sense of security. The Angola wreck showed that the threat of unexpected, large-scale slaughter was powerful, pervasive, and perhaps unmanageable. The fact that so many of the victims' corpses could not be identified—nineteen, according to the railroad, although the actual number was likely higher—added an ugly twist to this sense of vulnerability, and surely reawakened for many painful memories of the decimation of war. Two years after the conclusion of the Civil War, it was hardly as if Americans needed the reminder. The war, lasting from 1861 to 1865, had taken the lives of some 750,000 soldiers—or about one in ten white men of military age in 1860.[3] The war came as a tidal crest of death in a century brimming with it. Infant mortality was high, many children died of illnesses and injuries, old people died of

sicknesses and complaints that today can be cured with a trip to the drugstore. To read a newspaper from the mid-nineteenth century is to be plunged into a world where sudden death was commonplace. Scalding, scarlet fever, horse kicks, childbirth, buggy accidents, seizures, falls, drowning, smallpox—notices of such deaths cluster thickly in the pages of newspapers, and many more were so routine as to go unmentioned.

Set into this culture rife with mortality, the anticipation of—and the witnessing to—horrific railroad wrecks gave Americans in the late 1860s another reason to feel less than safe. This sense of insecurity was magnified by the fact that rail travel was becoming increasingly common for men and women across the country.

Rail lines had been in operation for more than thirty years by the time of the Angola disaster. People from all over the country had traveled on railroads and become used to the experience. Railroads had reached into many of the settled areas of the country: by 1860, the nation's 30,626 miles of track had pushed into thirty-one states and had extended almost as far as the edge of the westward frontier.[4] A glimpse at the number and variety of Angola's victims bears this fact out: adding the injured to the killed, the disaster affected 100 or more individuals, hailing from thirteen states and two countries, and representing a wide variety of social classes and professions—from bank presidents and lawyers, to shopkeepers and clerks, to housewives and the unemployed. It was a time in which passenger trains had become "culturally and psychically assimilated," as historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch has put it, by most of the public.[5] As for that train-riding public, it now included many women, children, and elderly people, in addition to the groups of youthful male travelers who had predominantly used the lines before the Civil War. Railroad accidents, when they occurred, now increasingly struck at populations Victorian-era society considered the most vulnerable. Increased mobility meant increased exposure to injury and death on the part of women, children, and elderly citizens who, whether at home or on the road, were supposed to be protected by *somebody:* if not a male family member, then an institution, a community, or a railroad company. A wreck in which a baby or virginal young woman was injured or killed was more than a shame; it was a breach of social trust. That happened at Angola, and many of those people who witnessed it—rescuers, other passengers, onlookers—were never the same afterward.

These accidents not only hurt vulnerable classes of people, but did so in ways that were unseemly by being thoroughly public. To die or be badly injured in a railway wreck in the post–Civil War period was to have your name and identity exposed in the nation's press—not once, but over and over again. People read of the corpses at Angola and learned that the clothes—indeed,

all the clues to gender and station in life—of some of the victims had been burned wholly away. For women, especially, this was a sensation of exposure and violation that was frightening and new. The death of a young woman in a railroad accident—away from home, perhaps alone, at times in gruesome circumstances that often left the remains difficult to recognize—was about as far as it was possible to get from the sort of "good death" in the confines of the household that was valued in the decades both before and right after the Civil War. For women and children this public nature of death on the rails was a shocking new reality, and a troubling sign of what modernity might mean for them. "A torn glove there!" ran one poem, written after the crash, about a maidenly young woman supposedly killed in the Angola accident. "In it still lingers, the shape of the fingers; / That some one has pressed, may be, and caressed, / So slender and fair."[6] Daniel Chadeayne, whose wife and daughters were on the train that wrecked at Angola, wrote grimly from the scene of the accident to friends in Titusville, Pennsylvania, that he was particularly thankful that his female relations had "escaped so well out of such a general slaughter."[7]

The Angola Horror also commanded enormous public attention because the wreck spoke directly to the ways in which Americans of the period viewed the railroads. Since the 1830s, men and women across the country had been dazzled by the success and expansion of the nation's network of railways. At the same time, there was a realization that the railroads meant some aspect of danger, along with the mobility, opportunity, and excitement that the rail lines surely provided. As trains became more useful they ceased to be the light, slow-moving, insubstantial carriages that they had been in the early days of railroading in the country—a time in which a typical journey might be a pleasure excursion lasting only a few miles. Passengers were now traveling faster, over hundreds of miles of track, and in bigger groups on larger cars pulled by more massive locomotives. By the middle of the century, the reach and power of these new sorts of railroads affected people beyond those who were riding as passengers. Railroads were shaping the communities, small and large, that they passed through along their routes. Many of these ripple effects were positive; but there were negative ones, as well. There was, for instance, a dawning realization that the railroads could be vectors that allowed for the faster spread of contagious illness and disease, such as yellow fever, among other social ills.[8] Still, most of the risk of the railroads fell to those riding the trains. The degree to which railroad travel had become more convenient and popular coincided with the extent to which, under hazardous conditions or with poor operation, these faster and heavier trains could be vehicles for brutal accidents. In the late 1860s, the realization of that fact was growing, and this created a potent combination of allure and fear where the fledgling railroads were concerned. When railway accidents happened, they "reawaken[ed] the memory of the

forgotten danger and the potential violence" that the trains represented.[9] Just so, in the wreck at Big Sister Creek in Angola, a truss bridge adjacent to the Angola railroad station some twenty miles southwest of Buffalo, Americans glimpsed with frightful clarity just what could happen when the technological and human frailties of this system of bigger, faster, heavier trains came to light.

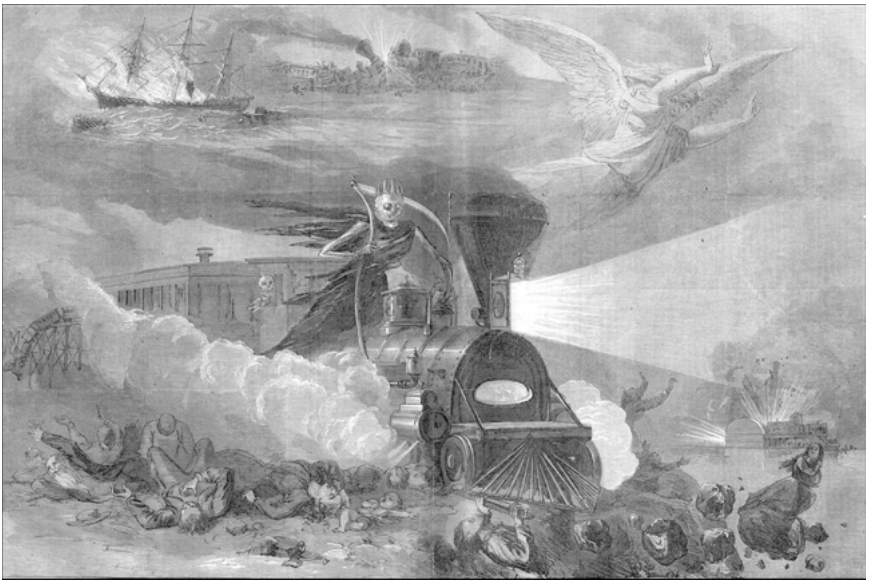
Much had changed about the railroads, over the years. But some important factors had not. Decades after those first historic, short-duration rides for passengers, many railroad trips still entailed anxiety-provoking sensations and experiences. And those anxieties were well founded. Wax candles and kerosene lamps for illumination, coal- and wood-burning stoves for heating cars, unreliable signaling mechanisms, flawed and unpredictable iron rails and switches, outdated link-and-pin couplers—all of these were in everyday use on railroads in the United States in the 1860s, and most would remain so for years. George Westinghouse Jr., a young man of twenty-one living in Schenectady, New York, in 1867, had not yet invented the air brake that would revolutionize the production of locomotives and cars by making them capable of safe and efficient stops controlled from the front of the train. Rudimentary hand brakes, operated by brakemen laboring in difficult conditions on the tops and end platforms of cars, still were uniformly used.

There was more. Trainmen typically had to meet no physical or intellectual criteria for employment. There were generally no tests, not even for hearing or the ability to discern one color from another (two fitness tests that would be phased in for the first time on American railroads in the 1870s and 1880s).[10] Bridges on the railway routes, often poorly built and infrequently maintained, were so nerve-wracking in some cases that they were, in the words of Charles Dickens, "most agreeable when passed."[11] Passenger cars had little in the way of shock absorbers, and jolted and rattled along the rails so jarringly that doctors warned passengers about the damage they might do themselves with "railway spine." As for car couplers, Ezra Miller had patented an automatic device in 1863 to replace the primitive link-and-pin system in use at the time, but many railroads did not take it up until the 1870s. Even then, many railroads opted for their own coupling systems, which led to an unsafe situation lasting for decades in which no coupler uniformity existed, meaning that connections between cars could be too loose, too tight, or otherwise faulty and unreliable.[12] As a result, the death toll for employees as well as passengers was high. "All through my employment as a switchman," wrote one railroader who worked coupling trains in this period, "[my sister] kept one clean sheet for the express purpose of wrapping up my mangled remains."[13]

In addition to this risky hodgepodge of faulty technology and poor regulation, American trains operated under a fractured system of local times, without the structure and reliability of a national railroad standard time. Trains

often passed through regions with multiple differing local times, especially as railroad networks matured and routes grew longer. This led to problems for people trying to track trains or plan their own travel. And because these discrepancies occurred over routes on which trains often still shared single-track lines and limited turnouts and sidings, miscommunications and misunderstandings about the timing of arrivals and departures could lead to missed connections or much worse—including head-on collisions, called "meets," as well as the deadly telescoping of trains by other trains.

Reading about the events at Angola and seeing artists' renderings of the scenes in Big Sister Creek both inspired and validated the public's fears about how wrecks on the roads could play out for unsuspecting men, women, and children. Their anxieties ranged from the still-felt general uneasiness instilled by four years of war to the specific concern for the well-being of family members who boarded trains for business trips or family visits. In the popular art and literature of the period, their nervous anticipations were distilled, often to stunning effect. One such illustration, "The Horrors of Travel," appeared in *Harper's Weekly* magazine in September 1865, two years before the wreck at Angola. It depicted an onrushing locomotive bearing down upon fleeing passengers—men,



In illustrations published in popular periodicals, Americans in the mid-1800s were warned of the dangers inherent in railway travel. This illustration, called "The Horrors of Travel," appeared in *Harper's Weekly* magazine just months after the end of the Civil War. It depicted a specter-like figure of Death, riding a locomotive, chasing down innocent men and women. From *Harper's Weekly*, September 23, 1865.

young women, babies—while carrying a frightful figure, a ghoul-like specter of death, garbed in tattered robes, brandishing a sharpened scythe.[14]

Such images were both a cause of and a response to the prevailing cultural climate of uncertainty about rail travel. Accompanying this image in *Harper's,* an editorial summed up the national mood. "During the present year Death appears to have set his mark upon the traveler," it stated. "There has come to be a general feeling of insecurity and distrust, and every man or woman who steps out of a railway car or steamboat at the termination of their journey unhurt does so with a feeling of sensible relief."[15] By the 1870s, Walt Whitman would link the thrill and the nerve-wracking power of railroads together in poetry, writing of the locomotive's "black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel" but also the "dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack."[16] Whitman made it clear that the locomotive had irrevocably changed the American landscape, in ways that were still being seen, felt, and measured. In this vein, in 1866, Louisa May Alcott turned the devastation of a train wreck into a plot device in *Behind a Mask,* a novella of deception and mistaken identity. In Alcott's story, the protagonist, Jean Muir, receives news that a man important to her has been killed in a railroad smash-up. "The poor young gentleman is so wet, and crushed, and torn, no one would know him," she is informed, "except for the uniform, and the white hand with the ring on it."[17] In an echo of the fiction, words such as these spoken by a messenger to Muir would appear in newspapers across the country after Angola, as readers absorbed bulletins from Buffalo and Big Sister Creek in which descriptions of artifacts were published in an effort to match victims with their identities. The *Buffalo Post* of December 23, 1867, listed dozens of such items, from the lofty to the mundane, found among the ashes and wreckage in the creek bed after the disaster. Examples included a pair of silver ice-skates, a small gold ladies' watch "without any inscription," the metal end-cap of a surveyor's staff that had been carried aboard the train by a young engineer from Buffalo, and a bunch of keys, melted to a lump, but yet intact enough to see that "several of the keys [were] numbered 24."[18] Each of the items in the newspaper listings was a portrait of a life stopped abruptly. Each struck chords in the hearts of men and women who read such accounts with emotions of concern and fear, looking for answers.

And so, for decades after 1867, Angola served as a watchword that conveyed to men and women the danger and unpredictability that came with the purchase of every train ticket.

BY THE CLOSE of the nineteenth century, the Angola derailment ranked with a small handful of others—Ashtabula (1876), Camp Hill (1856), Chatsworth

(1887)—as one of the worst railroad wrecks the nation had seen. That assessment has been corroborated in more recent times. Robert C. Reed, a railroad disaster historian of the mid-twentieth century, ranked Angola and Ashtabula as the two "most notorious railroad disasters" in the country's history.[19] Robert B. Shaw, another historian of train wrecks in America, wondered at the peculiar hold Angola exerted over the nation's collective consciousness. "For some reasons not entirely clear," Shaw wrote, "this accident secured a particularly strong hold upon the public imagination of that generation."[20] This was true despite the fact that Angola, deadly as it was, had claimed fewer total victims than other major wrecks.[21]

The generation of Americans that witnessed the Horror—embarking on the work of Reconstruction; only dimly anticipating the struggles between capital and labor and between industrial growth and regulation that would transpire in and through the Gilded Age and Progressive Era—bequeathed the facts of Angola, but not the vibrancy of its memory. The story faded in the late nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth. While the journal and newspaper accounts endured, the oral history of the wreck fell out of currency, not just in the nation but in the region of western New York where the wreck had happened.

Now, in some ways, the incident at Big Sister Creek feels remote from our modern world. Technology, a fact of modern life with which people in the nineteenth century were just becoming acquainted, surrounds us in our daily lives in the twenty-first. Details of the story might make it seem antique: the Victorian-era clothes the women wore, the car stoves at which the children warmed their hands, the jobs the men, just getting over the trauma of the Civil War, were looking forward to filling. A survey of these features could suggest a period drama, glimpsed vaguely through one of the tiny peephole windows that served as viewing stations on early trains. These elements can combine to create a sense that the narrative of Angola is a story of time gone by.

But that conclusion deserves reconsideration. We know that, in witnessing the Angola Horror, men and women in the nineteenth century found themselves moved, in profound and telling ways. The force of the experience of Angola—whether that of a rescuer looking for survivors on the evening of the wreck or a reader of newspapers in a distant city—was strong, and, as noted earlier, that strength was not by any means the simple result of sensational journalism. People of the 1860s knew what fear and powerlessness felt like, and Angola became for them a talisman of the uneasy tension they lived with. We may be more used to the experience of high-speed transportation than the men and women aboard the New York Express, but we know some of their uneasiness. We know what it feels like to ponder the meaning of an individual

life in the face of larger social, technological, and economic changes—changes that can seem to be out of the control of any individual or community.

In this way, the heated, sometimes sensationalistic journalists of the Angola period did us more of a favor than we might have imagined. They brought characters to life—real people that we can relate to, and empathize with, today. Reading the news accounts of the wreck and studying the illustrations that appeared on full pages in the magazines that circulated around the country, we meet the men and women that were swept up in the events of December 18, 1867. Among the passengers, heroes, victims, and onlookers were Dr. Romaine J. Curtiss, the brilliant and troubled military surgeon, returned too soon to scenes of carnage and death; conductor Benjamin F. Sherman, an experienced railroader who did his best to fulfill his duties in dire circumstances; the young Westinghouse, pondering the mysteries inherent in stopping thousands of pounds of racing metal on a thin iron track; bright men like Elam Porter and Joseph Stocking Lewis, college graduates embarking on promising careers; average women like Christiana Gates Lang and Emma Hurlburt Fisher, who would have remained anonymous all their lives, perhaps, had they not been caught up in this terrible event. Angola is their story. By considering first-person perspectives on the events of 1867, we are given the chance to engage with the worries, fears, hopes, and ambitions that average Americans felt and thought about so soon after the nation's epic war. The two hundred or so passengers riding the train that cold December day did not consider themselves to be representative—yet the life stories that brought them to that point offer striking insights into the time and place in which they lived. By looking at the Angola Horror, unquestionably a pivotal moment in American railroad history, from the perspectives of these people, we can explore the important legacies of this wreck from the standpoint of the history of the post–Civil War period.

Angola also speaks to us directly as a story of average people caught up in a terrific and unstoppable event. It offers insight into what it is like for everyday people to become victims of the technologies with which they live—technologies they may not fully understand or know how to control. And this narrative addresses how the media both expresses and creates our experience, be it firsthand or as an observer at a distance. Further, the story of the Angola Horror calls attention to how and what individuals and communities remember and memorialize, and what they come to forget.

For some 140 years, the victims of the Angola wreck never received a monument or memorial. That fact alone, set alongside the importance of the wreck in its own time, is worth thinking about.

"ANOTHER ANGOLA," the engineer at Ashtabula had mourned. But Ashtabula wasn't another Angola—it was a tragedy of its own. What follows is the story of the wreck that took place near the shores of Lake Erie, where the Buffalo and Erie Railroad passed through the small community of Angola, New York, on December 18, 1867.

There had been carnage on the rails between Camp Hill and Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, and in time disaster would strike the roads at Ashtabula, Ohio, and Chatsworth, Illinois. The stories of those events have been told, and surely will be told again. This book is the first recounting of what happened that day, and the days that followed, at Angola.

CHAPTER 1

Troubled Sleep

Wednesday, December 18, 1867 • *3:10 p.m.*

THEY WERE DREAMING.

The train moved along, a spot of color in the dull, snow-blanketed landscape of mid-December, a rush of sound in the silent womb of winter in western New York. As it swayed forward, rumbling at speeds approaching thirty miles an hour over the ice-crusted tracks toward the city more than twenty miles away, the heads of its two hundred passengers were likely filled with memories of what they had left behind, and visions of what they were journeying toward. Some surely dreamed of love. Some, of business. Some perhaps let their thoughts stray to the holiday season, Christmas and New Year's, that lay just a week in the future. Many of them were traveling long distances—the railroads let them do that now, even women and children, in ways that hadn't been possible a generation or two before. They were pioneers, hesitant and ambivalent ones in some ways, but pioneers nonetheless.

One of them wished he could leave his dreams behind.

Sitting in his upholstered seat in the second-to-last car of the train, Josiah P. Hayward no doubt felt apprehensive, as did other passengers around him. Unlike those passengers, however, some of whom might still be relatively new to the experience of train journeying, Hayward was used to railroad travel; it was part of his job. But he was more tense than usual this weekday afternoon—and, as a result, he had taken a few unaccustomed precautions.

Hayward's fears had originated in a nightmare he had suffered six months earlier. The twenty-four-year-old Pennsylvanian, who worked as a station agent

for the Buffalo and Erie Railroad in State Line, a village on the New York–Pennsylvania border, had been asleep in bed next to his wife of two years, Anna Shaw Hayward, that night in June. As he slept, his mind filled with fearsome images.[1] In his dream, Hayward saw himself standing in an unfamiliar place—a desert. Just as he began to examine his surroundings, Hayward heard a tremendous noise behind him: a "terrific crash," as if the gates of hell themselves had been unlocked. He turned to look, and found himself confronted with a piercingly bright light, so strong that it seemed "to reach to the very heavens."[2] What Hayward heard next was worse: screams. Dozens of them, mounting to the skies, pleading for relief—a wave of sound that was heartbreaking in its hopelessness. Hayward felt terrified; he then looked around and saw, to his surprise, a man standing nearby who was dressed as a monk.

"Where do the screams come from?" Hayward, in his dream, heard himself ask.

"From Hell," the monk answered.

"What does it mean?" he persisted.

"It means," the monk responded, "you must instantly die."[3]

Struggling awake, Hayward found himself bartering with the dream-monk in his state of semiconsciousness. More time, he begged. The monk considered, then told him he might have six months more before the dream would come to pass. At that moment, Hayward was shaken awake by Anna, who told him he had been thrashing wildly in his sleep. The death dream made a strong impression on both husband and wife.[4] Hayward found himself returning to the episode often in conversation with friends and family, not just for days or weeks, but for months afterward. It would later become a tidbit seized upon by the day's sensation-seeking journalists.

It wasn't like Josiah Hayward to feel so uncertain. He was the son of a farming family in the small community of North East, Pennsylvania, which had done well on the land; the Haywards had owned $3,200 in real estate and property by the Civil War. Young Josiah had been raised in an environment of practicality and common sense. As an employee of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad, he had been placed in a position of trust and responsibility.

After the Civil War ended, Hayward had chosen the railroads for a career because he had seen their potential. Thousands of young men his age had done the same thing, looking to the railroads as a means to achieve success and status—far more attractive than the family farm for a good livelihood. The post–Civil War period had, in fact, been something of a soot-scented gold rush; by 1870, more American men would be working for the country's railroads than in any other occupation.[5] By 1900, railroads and industries supporting their operation, from locomotive manufacturers to producers of

wooden ties, would employ "at least one-tenth of the adult population of [the] country."[6] Hayward, working for the Buffalo and Erie Railroad in that winter of 1867, was on the leading edge of that economic and cultural development.

A responsible employee, Hayward tried to shake the effects of his vision, sticking to his daily routine and focusing on his job. When early on a mid-December afternoon it became clear that he would need to take a quick trip to Buffalo by train, he boarded the chuffing cars that stood waiting in the State Line station. But Hayward did not climb aboard the Buffalo and Erie's New York Express without lingering trepidation.

Perhaps in grim irony, perhaps in search of a good-luck token with which to counteract any bad fortune that awaited him—or perhaps just thinking of Anna, and the future—Hayward made a brief stop before mounting the iron steps to the second-last of the train's passenger coaches. At the station window, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a few coins—fifty cents' worth. He plunked them down on the counter and took a small slip of paper from the agent in return.

When he climbed into the car, Hayward had a $3,000 insurance policy ticket tucked inside his coat. It was the biggest one he could buy.

HAYWARD'S JITTERS may have had as much to do with the time of year as with his nightmare. For winter, as railroad travelers in the 1860s liked to joke, was widely known to be "smash-up season."

Whether it was the icy and hazardous conditions, the dim light and shorter days, or the increased traffic due to the holiday season, no one knew for sure, but many travelers felt that more severe wrecks happened on the rails in the cold-weather months than at other times of year. Their own observations attested to the fact, which seemed to be borne out by the tallies of accidents and deaths that were reported in the pages of many newspapers and periodicals. It wasn't just inexperienced passengers who held this opinion; educated types, including newspaper and magazine editors, shared this view. Railroads were considered newsy items to the era's editors and reporters all year round, of course, but in the wintertime, such accounts seemed to crowd especially thickly onto the news pages in local papers. "The suicide, fire, railroad and steamboat accident term is upon us, and we shall be glad when it subsides," the *Boston Herald* stated in an editorial published in December 1867. "We truly are having a sup of horrors that taxes not only the full-face type of newspaper offices, but strains also to its utmost tension the nervous systems of the strongest-hearted among us."[7]

There was a lot of railroad track on which to fix these concerns. By 1840, the nation had laid 3,000 miles of track, far more than the 1,818 miles in

operation in Europe. Between 1850 and 1860, track mileage across the country had shot up at a rate four times that of the previous decade.[8] Much of it lay in places in the country, like Pennsylvania and New York, where freezing weather, snow, and ice were factors for a good portion of the year. And so, in this same unforgiving winter of 1867–68, none other than *Scientific American* magazine called attention to "the fact noticed by journalists and observing newspaper readers, that certain months of the year are particularly prolific of railroad casualties."[9] The magazine continued:

> The periodic return of this smash-up season … is even predicted by enterprising journalists, and it must, so they affirm, like the dog days, run through a certain course before it finally dies out. If, for causes beyond our ken, certain months of the year are peculiarly favored in this respect, it is evident that such a season is now upon us, for the record of the past few months shows a long list of railway casualties of all kinds and of all degrees of horror.[10]

Old superstitions, combined with questionable inductive reasoning, may have led some people to connect railroad crashes with a particular season. If so, that was hardly surprising, given that railroads had long been linked with superstitious beliefs and practices in the United States—from the way passengers and trainmen avoided trains bearing the number 13, to the ghost stories connected with dangerous places along the rails, to the way crew members marked the trackside graves of railroaders killed in the line of duty (the symbol of a broken wheel was often used to signify a trainman's place of burial). Passengers may not always have voiced these ideas explicitly, but the way they spoke of and acted around the railroads, as well as the way they incorporated the imagery and culture of trains into their lives, revealed the uneasy mixture of their feelings. By 1867, many American men and women had ridden on trains. They had had enough contact with the railroads that they were beginning to feel capable of using them for their own various purposes, from work to visiting relations to traveling to school. But that did not mean that these men and women felt comfortable and at ease about the railroads on which they rode. To the contrary, Victorian railroads and their machines, which did not seem to obey the laws of nature in certain ways, were viewed by many men and women of the period as foreign, threatening—even slightly otherworldly.[11] The public response to them—part fascination and embrace, part fear and rejection—found expression in such manners of thinking as the "smash-up season." It found expression, at times, in black humor.

This may explain why the Victorians frequently gave their locomotives colorful names, often borrowing them from mythology, literature, warfare, or the animal kingdom, or using them to sum up aims and ambitions.[12] One midwestern railroad hopefully dubbed an early locomotive the "Pioneer." The Buffalo and Erie Railroad and its predecessor line, the Buffalo & State Line, offered riders the chance to settle in for journeys behind locomotives called Vixen, Vampire, Hecla, and Vulcan; newspapers of the day did not name the locomotive pulling the New York Express. (Later on in the decade, some railroad company executives, perhaps realizing more fully the power of public relations, began naming locomotives more sedately, with modest titles like the Charles H. Lee and the Dean Richmond.)[13] Of course, if naming the beast didn't work as a way of taming it, then there was always humor to fall back on. And so, in Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad,* published in 1869, the author had his narrator refer to railway accidents in an offhanded way that was nonetheless carefully pitched to the pressing concerns of the age. "No, they have no railroad accidents to speak of in France," the narrator states in Twain's novel. "But why? Because when one occurs, *somebody* has to hang for it!"[14]

THE JOURNEY of the New York Express came a week before Christmas. A time to be home, or to think of returning there, if one had been unlucky or unwise enough to stray. Outside, temperatures across upstate New York and in northwestern Pennsylvania were frigid, and hadn't risen above the freezing mark in nearly two weeks.[15] In the city of Buffalo, much to the satisfaction of young men and women, sleighing had begun a little over a week earlier, on December 10, with the arrival of steady, thick snow. "Sleighing begins," noted William Ives, the librarian for the city's Young Men's Association, in his weather journal.[16] Area newspapers marveled that the sudden cold snap extended deep into the middle of the United States. "Good sleighing in Washington and Louisville, three hundred miles south of this latitude," noted one, the *Hamilton (Ont.) Evening Times.*[17] It had begun to feel like winter, and like Christmas.

On board the four passenger coaches of the eastbound New York Express that Wednesday afternoon rode many men, women, and children who were on their way to visit family members and friends for the holidays. This in itself was a sign of the times: a generation or two before, the train might not have been so full of young women traveling toward reunions with family, of babies, of older people making journeys to visit grown children, of newlyweds. Railroads had made such trips—many of them all-day affairs—possible, and affordable, and, for the most part, safe. The express train as a result was

stuffed to groaning with trousseaus and wedding gifts, as well as all manner of Christmas surprises: pen wipers, sachets, volumes of Tennyson and Dickens.[18] In the baggage cars and in the coach cars as well, trunks and traveling cases contained gaily wrapped presents—some bearing the name of Cleveland businessman John D. Rockefeller—while others were stuffed into the valises clutched by passengers. There was little room to move about, as each car contained a full complement of fifty or so people; travelers crammed their belongings beneath their seats, or shoved them into overhead racks, hoping for the best.

The Christmas holiday always had meaning, of course, but this year was special. Though the war between North and South had ended a little more than two years before, an undeniably wartime feeling still hung in the air, especially where holidays and family celebrations were concerned. So many men had served, and so many died: about 750,000 soldiers in all, from both sides of the conflict, and each of those deaths had torn a gaping hole in homes, families, and communities.[19] Two years later, those wounds still ached. All over the country, people struggled to pick up the pieces of lives shattered by the war, to cope with the "debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war," in the words of poet Walt Whitman, who voiced a realization many families knew all too well, that the slain soldiers were able to find rest, in the soil of their early graves, long before their bereft loved ones could. "They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not," Whitman had written. "The living remain'd and suffer'd."[20]

In the winter of 1867, however, that lingering sense of sorrow and loss was coupled with a new sensibility. It was one that suggested that perhaps the best and most productive way to celebrate Christmas was to do so as a unified nation, bonding together over a shared experience of hope. *Godey's Lady's Book,* in its issue that December 1867—a periodical some passengers on the New York Express may well have been reading—had argued for just this kind of transformative Christmas, a season that would bring citizens from all parts of the country together in a spirit of brotherhood and emotional unity.[21] Christmas could become a moment that was more important, and perhaps more uniquely American, than even the Fourth of July. The magazine stated it this way: "To us—Americans—Christmas should be the glorious holiday of the year."[22]

Despite these calls for unity and peace, the winter of 1867–1868 seemed to many to possess an odd, unsettled feeling. The nation, emerging from a bitter war that had made its citizens examine the first principles of their democracy, was entering a new phase of its history. No one knew what that phase would look like. Bracing change was coupled with a contemplative, backward-gazing attitude befitting a country that had just survived horrific