Reflections on a Tragedy: the 1921 Bryn Athyn Train Wreck

An Address Presented in Observance of the 90th Anniversary of the Bryn Athyn Train Wreck on Monday, December 5, 2011 at 10:00am at Bryn Athyn Station, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania by Mark Liss, Secretary of the Southampton Railroad Station Society.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Southampton Railroad Station Society, I want to thank all of you for joining us this morning as we commemorate an event whose repercussions were felt not only in our immediate environs but also across the entire nation. It is an event which continues, ninety years later, to cast a long shadow across the landscape of time. While all those who survived the wreck have passed, some who are assembled here today are descended from families who were directly touched by this tragedy.

December 5th 1921 dawned cold and brisk. The prior evening’s precipitation had blanketed the Pennypack Creek Valley with a few inches of snow. In the darkness of the pre-dawn hours many were roused from their warm beds to start the routine of a typical work day. For some, part of that routine would include a ride on the Reading Railroad’s Newtown Branch to their place of employment in the vast workshop known as Philadelphia. To the conductors who worked the trains, the daily commuters became friends; some were even family members or neighbors.

There were others on the Philadelphia-bound trains that morning who were less frequent riders. The recent observance of Thanksgiving meant that the Christmas holiday season was getting underway. No town along the railroad, not even Newtown, could compare to the hustle and bustle, the extent and variety of shops and stores and the excitement that could be found in the Quaker City. The railroad’s own Reading Terminal Market was a frequent destination for many suburban shoppers who were conveyed to the city by the company’s trains. The greatest draw, of course, was the numerous department stores which lined Market Street. Gimbels, Lit Brothers, Strawbridge & Clothier and perhaps the grandest of them all – Wanamakers – a virtual city unto itself complete with its own post office. Undoubtedly, there were more than a few young hearts beating a little faster on the train that morning in anticipation of the wondrous sights that awaited them in Wanamaker’s famed toy department. On that routine weekday morning, no one could have imagined that some of those same hearts would soon be tragically and prematurely stilled forever.

As we stand here today, many who regularly traveled this stretch of railroad in 1921 would still recognize the place, even after the passing of nine decades. The Pennypack Creek still rolls along its tree-lined banks in its journey to the sea. Fetters Mill, the iron bridge and the Bryn Athyn Station still remain – even the tracks are still in place, although no longer maintained to Reading Company standards. The milk platform maintains its trackside vigil waiting for the milk cans
that will never arrive here again. Meanwhile, the far-off sound of the locomotive whistle, echoing up the valley, no longer is heard. This place is still surprisingly tranquil, allowing even for the encroachment of civilization, under the guise of progress, which has occurred over the last ninety years. It was tranquil in 1921 as well, save for the occasional passing of a train led by a chugging steam locomotive with the creaking of its wooden coaches in tow and the rhythmic clack-clack of steel wheels rolling over jointed steel rails. But at approximately 7:55 am on the morning of December 5th, 1921 there were different sounds which emanated from this valley; unfamiliar and disturbing sounds among which were a thunderous crash of metal-on-metal, the hissing rush of escaping steam and the splintering of wood followed by the roar of fire. It was the sound resulting from two trains colliding head-on. It was the sound of death.

Things were very different on February 2nd, 1878 when the line, known then as the Philadelphia, Newtown & New York Railroad was completed and the first train arrived in Newtown. The sounds then were ones of celebration as the dream which had begun six years earlier with the chartering of the Philadelphia & Newtown Railroad were brought to fruition with the backing of the vast resources of the mighty Pennsylvania Railroad. But the Pennsylvania soon lost interest in the line and its ownership passed to its rival, the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad. For some 97 years, the Reading Railroad operated trains on this line, all the while investing in the maintenance and continual improvement of the physical plant and overseeing the transition from steam to diesel power, wooden to steel passenger coaches and gas to electric illumination. In 1983, after a little more than a century of service, SEPTA would discontinue operation of the line above Fox Chase. Perhaps the last chapter in the history of the Newtown Branch remains yet to be written.

The events of December 5th 1921 can be looked upon as the railroad’s version of the “perfect storm”. The operational failures which contributed directly to the cause of the wreck were the result of poor judgment, sloppy workmanship and incorrect assumptions - the product of the innate imperfection of the human condition. The continued use of antiquated equipment and obsolete technology – in the form of the wooden coaches and gas illumination - were the product of an era of transition where it was commonplace for such equipment to be relegated to use on lightly-trafficked branch lines. These factors contributed more directly to the extent of injuries and fatalities than the collision itself. Geography and geology, formed slowly over the course of millennia, necessitated the rock cut and sharp curve which impaired the clear sight vision of the locomotive engineers and contributed to the subsequent difficulty of firefighters and potential rescuers in accessing the wreck site to render timely assistance in freeing those trapped in the shattered coaches and enveloped by the resulting inferno. At the same time some, who survived the impact of the collision and, once free of the wreckage, returned to it, often injured and at risk to their own well-being, to render assistance to their fellow travelers. The indomitable spirit reflected in the exploits of these heroes, their successes and frustrating failures remain a testament to the goodness and decency which dwells in the hearts of civilized men and women.

Those of us who are dedicated to the preservation and restoration of the Southampton Station have come to recognize the Bryn Athyn Wreck as the single-
most significant event to occur on the Newtown Branch throughout its long operational history. Our goal of restoring this historic station has now taken on a higher meaning. The preservation of all of the historic fabric and documentation of the history of the entire Newtown Branch has become our ultimate goal, with a restored Southampton Station made a repository for this material – a Regional Railroad Heritage Center – dedicated to the memory of those lost on that fateful December morning ninety years ago.