

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 10—Blown to Smithereens!

Smithereens – n. pl. Fragments or splintered pieces; bits. From Irish Gaelic *smidirin*.

Train No. 61 left Scranton at 1:20 p.m. Saturday, June 8, 1901 on a return trip to Elmira. It stopped at Binghamton to drop off and pick up cars before proceeding westward to Vestal. From an account of the accident by the Broome Republican newspaper: "When train No. 61 arrived at Vestal it stopped to take on water at the tank near the station. This consumed about half an hour and during that time a flagman, Henry Polhamus, went back to be on the outlook for trains." No. 61's engine was at the Vestal depot while the caboose was positioned approximately 700 feet east of the station.

A "wildcat" train has no schedule, it runs according to orders it receives at the stations it passes. On the night of June 8 a two-engine wildcat train left Binghamton, headed west, one half hour after No. 61. The fast moving wildcat saw the caboose of the stopped train in its path and attempted to signal its fast approach. Both wildcat engines sounded their horns but it was too late and the wildcat crashed into No. 61 setting off five tons of dynamite carried in a boxcar just ahead of the caboose. Seven cars and the two wildcat engines were blown to smithereens.



The 9:45 p.m. explosion was reported to have been heard as far as 30 miles away. The dynamite created a large hole that filled with the tangled metal and wood of engines and cars. Several cars of coal spilled and caught fire. Debris hurled northward across the Susquehanna River where one large piece of rail imbedded itself at Casino Park, now the U-E football field.

Broken windows and damage to houses and barns occurred throughout the hamlet of Vestal. The home of Suzie and Fayette Rounds was damaged. The Vestal depot and Methodist Church, along with the homes and barns on the Leighton, Sayles, and Eldridge properties also sustained significant damage. It was reported that windows were broken in Union, Binghamton and as far away as Apalachin. Estimates of the total damage ranged from \$100,000 to more than \$250,000.

Five of the trainmen, two from the rear of No. 61 and three from the wildcat, died when they jumped from the trains moments before the crash; another seven were injured. Physicians and officials who arrived to help were greeted to a gruesome scene. They worked throughout the night to assist the injured and locate the bodies of the dead. Wrecking crews arrived at 1:00 a.m. to begin clearing the debris yet the estimated 10,000 onlookers who traveled to Vestal on Sunday morning found a scene of death and destruction. Amazingly, the track repair was reported to have been completed in 24 hours.



It was estimated over 10,000 traveled to Vestal on Sunday morning to view the remains of the wreck. Many left with souvenirs.

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Burning Coal Fires

The five dead were: John P. Kelley, head brakeman – wildcat; John Colter, first engine fireman – wildcat; Fred Wetherbee, second engine fireman - wildcat; S. R. Polhamus, conductor – No. 61; Elmer P. Polhamus, trainman – No. 61. The seven injured were: Henry L. Polhamus, flagman – No. 61; William Meddick, head flagman – No. 61; John Lonergan, second engine engineer – wildcat; George Mattice, head engineer – wildcat; Charles Miller – wildcat; Martin Kelly, head brakeman – wildcat; M. Harrison, conductor – wildcat.

Newspaper reports of the time said the wildcat did not see No. 61 on the tracks until it came around a curve in the tracks but aerial photos or a walk on the Rail Trail clearly show the track was straight.

Some of the “facts” reported by newspapers across the state are corrected in the 1907 Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Third Department, NY- Kelly vs. Delaware, L. & W. R. Co. suit which points out that the dynamite car should have been in the middle of the 51 car lineup.

It also reports that the boxcar contained 24,000 pounds of dynamite or 12 tons rather than the five reported. Both crews were from Elmira and all were D.L. & W. employees. Head engineer of the wildcat train, George Mattice, was found criminally negligent after it was disclosed that he had left his post to get a drink of tea moments before the crash. Likewise Henry Polhamus was found negligent for failing to take the necessary precautions that would have flagged the wildcat. It also states that train No. 61 had completed taking on water and had just begun to proceed west when it was hit.

Residents of Binghamton who reported seeing a bright purple flash to the west at the time of the explosion that night thought it was one of the brick powder houses that had exploded. Those four powder houses generate a lot of questions. People frequently ask...Was Sugar Creek Road renamed to Powderhouse Road because of the powder houses? Where were they located? When were they built? What did they look like? Did they hold powder used in the Civil War? Research done on early property deeds helps to answer some of these questions.

Archibald Stone bought what became the Stone Farm from Edward Tompkins in 1859. He and wife Amelia of the Town of Binghamton sold a small piece of land for \$50.00 to the Schaghticoke Powder Co. on the 8th day of October 1885. The piece is described in Deed book 127, page 460 as: “Beginning at a point in the centre of the public highway known as the Fuller Hollow Road near where the said road leaves the South line of the Bingham Patent, and running thence South 24 feet 9 inches to a stone monument, thence South 25 feet to another monument thence West 25 feet to a monument No. 3, and thence North to the center of said highway and thence east along the center of said highway being the Bingham line 25 feet to the place of beginning.” Further the deed states that “...said plot of land being purchased for the purpose of erecting thereon a powder house or magazine for the storage of gunpowder.”

On the 26 December 1890 Winfield Stone, Archibald's son, leased 25 sq. feet of land to the Hazard Powder Company of Hazardville, CT. The deed, found in book 143 at page 547 reads in part: “.....25 sq. feet of land upon which to build a powder magazine to be located on my farm on Fuller Hollow Road east of the Schaghticoke Powder Co. magazine. Said magazine to be built of brick with tin or corrugated iron roof with iron door and made as nearly as possible fireproof for the term of 5 years with

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Example of Typical Brick Powder House

the option of the second party to continue the lease for the term of 5 years more at the expiration of the first 5 years. Annual rent of \$12.00 payable in advance of the 10th day of May each year.”

After twenty years Thomas L. Doremus, president of the Schaghticoke Power Co., sold their 25 foot sq. piece of land to Callahan & Douglas of Binghamton for \$50.00 on the 14th of November 1905. (Book 200, page 550) Seventeen years later, on March 28, 1922, Callahan & Douglas sold the piece back to George's son Garry T. Stone. (Book 115, page 215).



Red Box Shows Location of Powder Houses.

A New York Times article dated 10 August 1861 titled “Gunpowder and its Manufacture” explains that: “Gunpowder seldom explodes after having been packed. The danger lies in the process of manufacture.” Powder was packed in containers of many sizes; from kegs holding 100 pounds to half-pound canisters. It was then sold from small magazines or powder houses by agents of the major powder companies. By the 1950s the black powder era had ended.

Although the powder companies mentioned did supply gunpowder to the Union army during the Civil War, the magazines on the Stone farm were built twenty years after the conflict ended. It is likely the black powder they held was used in the construction of railroads, highways, and tunnels, or to blast out stumps in preparation for planting fields as described by the DuPont Powder Co. in a 1936 article in the Binghamton Press.

The Stone Farm was eventually subdivided into large residential parcels where today patios and barbecues occupy the land where the four small powder houses were once tucked into the hillside. The search continues for answers to: How many kegs of powder did the four magazines hold? When were they removed from the hillside? Is the story true that for a time they held fireworks used for local celebrations? If you have the answers or a photo of the powder houses, please contact me at mhadsell@vestalny.com.

Additional information and sources for this article are found at the Historian's office.