

# A Train Wreck, A S



# ong, and a Memory

It was a cold, moonlit night that February 4, 1887. The temperature stood at 20 below zero when the Montreal Express, a well-known passenger train, left White River Junction around 2 o'clock in the morning on its way north to Montreal.

White River Junction was a very busy railroad center in those days, and many trains met there. The Montreal Express contained one group of cars which had come up to White River Junction from Boston and other cars which had come from New York through Brattleboro and Windsor. Some of the people on the train were on their way to attend a big winter carnival in Montreal.

About four miles north of White River Junction the railroad tracks ran over a huge wooden bridge that crossed the White River. It was the biggest and longest bridge on that stretch of the railroad, and the engineers always slowed down when they took their trains over that bridge.

On that cold and blowy night one of the rails split at the edge of the bridge just after the engine and the coal car went over it. The car behind slipped off the rails and went bumping along over the cross-ties. All of the cars broke away from the engine and shot over the edge of the bridge onto the ice forty feet below.

Many people were killed and lots more were injured in the fall, but an even greater danger lay ahead. In those days railroad cars were heated with small coal stoves which were tended by members of

the train crew. It was not long after the wooden cars had fallen to the ice and splintered into many pieces before the coals from those heating stoves set the wreckage on fire. Many of those who survived the fall and were stuck in the wreckage burned to death.



As the flames from the burning railroad cars leaped upward, the wooden railroad bridge overhead also caught fire. It was not long before it, too, crashed to the ice and burned, killing some who might otherwise have been saved.

Survivors carried badly hurt passengers to a nearby farmhouse. It took less than an hour for a relief train to get to the bridge from White River Junction. The train carried volunteer helpers as well as several doctors who had been routed from their beds to help in the emergency.

Despite all that could be done 29 died and 39 were injured. News of the wreck quickly spread. Newspapers and magazines carried stories about the wreck and the terrible results. Some even had pictures or

drawings. Many people became angry to think that these railroad cars were still heated with coal fires which were so dangerous if there was an accident. This wreck and others helped to bring about a new safety law that would no longer permit heating railroad cars with stoves.

Not long after the wreck a folksong was written about this terrible railroad tragedy. Nobody knows who wrote it or when or where it first appeared. Local people sang the song and copies were printed in some of the newspapers. Today, nearly 100 years after the wreck, people still sing the song.

Was there really a little Joe McGret travelling on the train with his father? Were they on their way to Montreal to visit the winter carnival or did they live there? No one knows for sure. Perhaps the folksong writer just “invented” little Joe to make his story more interesting. What do you think?

The big old railroad bridge four miles north of White River Junction is still there. Today, however, it is a steel bridge that can't really burn. You can see it from Interstate Highway 89 next time you go that way.

## The Hartford Wreck



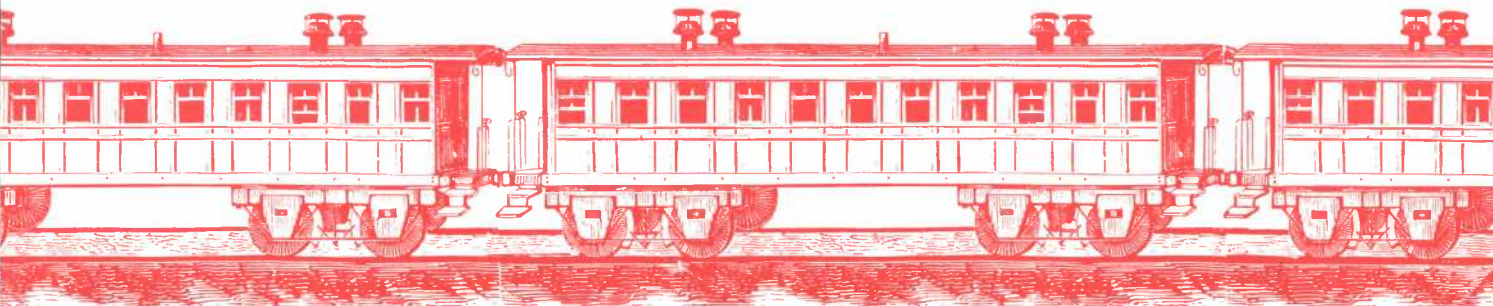
In the country far and near,  
Each day you'll read and hear  
Of shocking accident by land or sea.  
But the saddest I recall  
Is the latest of them all.

The Central Vermont Railroad tragedy.  
'Twas the Montreal express  
It was speeding at its best;  
Near Hartford Bridge it struck a broken rail.  
When down with a fearful crash  
To the river it was dashed.

And few survived to tell the horrid tale.

Chorus:

It was shocking to relate.  
It was sad to contemplate;  
No hand could paint a picture of the sight.  
Little they thought that death was nigh  
When they bade their friends goodby  
On leaving home upon that fatal night.



It was in the dead of night.

No words can paint the sight

The sleeping cars were filled with human freight.

When the fatal train was dashed.

To the river with a crash.

A hundred souls went out to meet their fate.

Horrors met the victims' gaze.

For the wreck was soon ablaze.

And fainting cries for help were sad to hear.

None responded to the call;

They must perish one and all;

Alas, kind friends, no help for them was near.

One I never shall forget.

Was of little Joe McGret

Who was with his father on that fatal train.

Although wounded by a fall,

Still he heard his father's call,

And to free him from the wreckage tried in vain.

"It's no use, my boy," said he,

"For there is no help for me."

And then the cruel flames around him curled.

Little Joe began to cry,

When his father said "Goodby;

We'll meet again up in the other world."

## *Folksongs Are Fun*

*Folksongs are story songs that people make up and sing about interesting and exciting things that happen to them or they hear about happening to others. The songs are often memorized and sung for many years. Sooner or later someone writes them down so that other people can learn them and sing them. Almost anyone can tell a story in a song. You could try it. Perhaps something really exciting has happened to you or your friends and relatives that you could write about. Some historical event in your town might be a good subject for a song. Maybe you could fit the words to a tune you already know. If others in your class also wrote songs, you could have your own program of folksongs.*

