

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Harvest of Victims:
St. Paul's Smallpox
Epidemic of 1924*

Page 10

Summer, 2003

Volume 38, Number 2

Fog and a Dark October Night

**The Fabled Wreck of the 'Ten Spot'
In Its Plunge to the River Below**

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The wreck of Terminal Railway's No. 10 on October 15, 1912 when the 145,000-pound locomotive, tender, and eight cars plunged off the railroad's swing bridge into the Mississippi twenty-five feet below. Photograph from the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Case Files at the Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* returns to the first decades of the twentieth century with two compelling accounts of losses of life: the wreck of the locomotive "Ten Spot" on a foggy night in 1912 and the virulent smallpox epidemic in St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1924-25. In our lead article, labor historian Dave Riehle recounts what happened on the Terminal Railway swing bridge across the Mississippi River on the border of Ramsey and Dakota counties in South St. Paul and how the accident killed the locomotive's engineer. Paul Nelson then tells us how smallpox spread through the Twin Cities, killing many more in Minneapolis than in St. Paul, over a fourteen-month period and how vitally effective vaccination was against that dread disease. In light of current public debate over the need for vaccination of large numbers of the populace against smallpox, Nelson's research provides a cautionary episode from Minnesota's public health records.

Moving from problems in industrial safety and the efforts of public health officials in the prevention of a highly communicable disease, this issue finishes with two charming and nostalgic articles. The first, written by Paul Johnson, is about the enigmatic Minnie Dassel (1852-1925), a long-time St. Paul resident who was well-connected but fell on hard times and yet was always willing to help others in need. This issue concludes with Carleton Vang's recollections of summer swimming holes and the State Fair neighborhood of his carefree youth in the 1930s while growing up in St. Paul's Midway area.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Fog and the Dark of an October Night— **The Fabled Wreck of the ‘Ten Spot’ in Its Plunge Twenty-Five-Feet to the Mississippi Below**

David Riehle

“**F**og,” said Carl Sandburg, “comes in on little cat feet.” It came quickly and soundlessly onto the Mississippi River bottoms on Tuesday, October 15, 1912, a few hours past midnight. Moist air, chilling quickly after sunset, settled on the land and water still warm from the autumn sun. Dense fog and darkness soon lay across the wide basin between the bluffs south of St. Paul, “looking over harbor and city on silent haunches,” as the poet said. The city slept, but work went on without pause in the railroads, meatpacking plants, and stockyards that sprawled for miles along the river flats. Those whose labor sustained the great enterprises steeled themselves for struggle against the call of sleep and trusted to experience and determination to protect themselves from whirring machinery, tense and restless animals, and the unpredictable movement of railroad cars and engines. Work went on, unimpeded by the natural rhythms of life. But sometimes the march of production faltered—and stumbled.

Recently, an unexpected intersection of several elements, including near century-old photographs, legal briefs, and a persistent oral tradition has brought to light a poignant tale of life, work, and death on that long-ago October morning.

“Under the harvest moon,” Sandburg reminds us, it sometimes happens that “. . . Death, the gray mocker, comes and whispers to you. . . .” That night it whispered to Charles Cramer, a railroad engineer.

Shortly before 6 A.M. bridge tender

Lyman Tibbetts heard a long blast from the steam whistle of the riverboat “Hiawatha,” captained by its owner, thirty-year old Claude Walsingham. That blast, he knew, was a request to swing open the moveable span of his railroad bridge so the boat could pass through on its way from St. Paul to Rock Island, Illinois. The bridge, constructed three years earlier by the St. Paul Bridge and Terminal Railway Company, bisected the river about three miles below the city. Its alternating positions accommodated both river and rail traffic. The bridge’s function was to connect the Terminal Railway’s yards in Ramsey and Dakota counties. The railroad served South St. Paul’s massive stockyards and packinghouses and interchanged with major railroads on the St. Paul side.



The “Hiawatha,” on the Mississippi around 1913. It had been remodeled as a double-deck excursion barge “with all modern conveniences, including a new piano for use of patrons.” Its passage under the bridge left disaster in its wake. Unless otherwise indicated, this and other photographs with this article are from the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Case Files at the Minnesota Historical Society.



A front view of the derailment of the St. Paul Bridge and Terminal Railway's No. 10.

The 'Hold Up' Signal

Tibbets blew his own long blast from the steam whistle on the bridge, indicating that the span was open and that the "Hi-awatha" could proceed. As the "Hi-awatha" passed through the channel and receded into the fog beyond the open bridge, Tibbets could hear a train approaching from the railroad's yards on the east side of the river, pulled, he assumed, by the same switch engine which had passed over the bridge from the South St. Paul side an hour or so earlier. He blew another blast on his whistle, not as long as the one for the steamboat. That meant, "hold up," when directed to a train. But the mounting crescendo of noise from the train did not abate, and somewhat alarmed, Tibbets repeated the "hold up" signal.

To his horror, Tibbets saw the yellow glow of the engine's oil-burning headlight emerge from the fog and darkness and then hurtle suddenly downward. A cacophony of sounds rolled through the fog across the open span as the engine, tender, and eight cars plunged off the end

of the bridge into the river twenty-five feet below: a thud and splash as the 145,000-pound locomotive dropped abruptly into the muddy river bed; loud sizzling from liberated steam as the locomotive's boiler twisted and ruptured and the red-hot fire box came in contact with the water; splintering and cracking wood as the stock cars fell on top of each other; agonized bellowing and squealing as hogs, sheep, and cattle were crushed or broke free into the river. Then, relative silence, broken only by the still hissing boiler, plaintive and agitated animal cries, and urgent yells from the trainmen walking up from the caboose at the rear of the train's last seven cars, still standing on the track.

With a few speculative elaborations, this is essentially what happened, and what had to happen, when the Terminal Railway's Engine No. 10 carried Engineer Charles Cramer, Fireman Frank Weber, and Brakeman James Garvin off the approach to the railroad's steam-powered swing bridge into the Mississippi River early on Tuesday, October 15, 1912. Garvin and Weber either

jumped or were thrown free as the locomotive tilted forward and fell into the river, and they survived with minor injuries. Engineer Cramer was not so lucky. His body was not retrieved from underneath the wreckage until the following day.

Varying Versions

The preceding account is supported by numerous sources, including contemporary newspaper reports and other pertinent records. Not all versions can be fully reconciled with each other, however. For example, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *South St. Paul Daily Reporter* both offered descriptions of bridge tender F.C. Tibbets at his post. The *St. Paul Daily News* had a somewhat different version: "Daniel Tibbet, bridge tender, refuses to talk of the wreck," the paper reported. Fortunately for future historians, it appears that Tibbets did speak of the wreck, albeit to the *Minneapolis Journal* rather than one of the hometown papers, in which, identified, as "Limon Tibbets," he was quoted extensively. Finally, there is one "Lyman B. Tibbets," listed in the 1911 *St. Paul City Directory* as living in South St. Paul and employed as a railway engineer. This, it seems likely, is the correct identity of the Terminal Railway's bridge tender, who, as the employee in charge of a steam-powered bridge, did have to fulfill the requirements of a stationary engineer, besides being responsible for controlling the movement of the bridge span. Other matters are not resolvable even by sifting through the numerous accounts in the daily papers. Why, for example, did Cramer, an experienced engineer who had worked this territory for four years, and no doubt made hundreds of crossings of the swing bridge, fail to stop?

Charles Cramer's death was, inevitably, a tragic occurrence for his family, friends, and fellow workers. The thirty-six-year-old Cramer was, the *Pioneer Press* said, "one of the most popular of the younger railroad men in the cities." In 1908 the Cramer family moved to South St. Paul from Waterloo, Iowa, where Charles was working as a locomotive fireman for the Illinois Central Railroad. The move probably was intended to



A group of men searching the Mississippi channel for wreckage and survivors.

take advantage of employment opportunities on the newly inaugurated Bridge and Terminal Railway, with the additional incentive of a promotion to locomotive engineer. The venture, regrettably, did not have a happy ending. Only four years later Cramer's wife, Willa, was left a widow with two young children, and few resources. Cramer's Masonic brothers carried him on his last run, as railroaders say, to a grave in St. Paul's Forest Cemetery, where his headstone, inscribed with a familiar Masonic symbol, overlooks the rolling terrain from a high hill. Ultimately the family was reunited at this final destination, where Willa and her two children are buried along with their husband and father. And Charles Cramer's fellow railroad workers told and retold the story of the wreck on the Terminal Railroad's swing bridge for generations.

Fog and the River

In the late 1960s, John Winter of Cottage Grove, a veteran switchman who retired in 2001 and spent much of his career in the railroad yards of South St. Paul, heard the story of the wreck from older workers. They in turn had heard it in their youth from railroad men who had been employed by the St. Paul Bridge and Terminal in the year of the accident.

Why did Engineer Cramer, undoubtedly familiar with every foot of track leading up to the bridge, fail to stop short of the open span? It even was reported that Cramer had previously told his coworkers on the train that he had dreamed on many occasions about going off the bridge.

The fog was thick, so the story told to Winter ran, and the bridge was powered by steam. Instead of lanterns or flags, the bridge operator used blasts on a steam

whistle to communicate with trains. Four short blasts was a call for signals from the approaching train and engine. Two shorts in reply meant, "Come ahead—the bridge is lined," while one short meant, "Stop—do not proceed. Bridge is open."

On the night of the accident, the "Ten Spot," as railroad men called Engine No. 10, had crossed the river from the South St. Paul side to the Hoffman Avenue yards to pick up stock cars destined for South St. Paul meatpacking houses. The engine and cars left the yard. As they approached the bridge they whistled for signals. The bridge tender replied with one blast, meaning, "hold." But the train kept coming, he judged from the escalating noise.

"The track is uphill somewhat approaching the bridge," Winter related, "so the engineer may have continued to pull at a reduced speed expecting the

bridge to be closed. It was mid-autumn and river traffic was rare at that time of year. The story was that the bridge tender, hearing the train still coming, blew another short blast for 'stop' but Cramer interpreted it as *two blasts*, meaning 'come ahead.' Only when he was close enough to see that the bridge was open did he attempt to stop, and with no airbrakes, he could not stop in time and he went into the river. The heavy fog probably contributed to the failure to stop in time, since the accumulated moisture on the rails would have made them slippery and greasy."

That supposition is supported by an allegation in the legal complaint filed in Ramsey County District Court in March 1913 on Willa Cramer's behalf that bridge tender Tibbets had "wrongfully, erroneously and negligently signaled and directed [Charles Cramer] to drive said engine across said bridge while the draw was open."



A group men inspecting the ruined engine on November 4, 1912, some weeks after the disaster.



A stock train on the Terminal Railway bridge in 1915, three years after the accident. Photo from a South St. Paul souvenir publication of the South St. Paul Commercial Club,



The railway's engines No. 10 and 11, circa 1915, at the South St. Paul roundhouse. Photograph from the Dakota County Historical Society.

The 'Ten Spot' had luck?

The railroad workers' oral tradition, as John Winter heard it, must have had its origin in the testimony of Frank Weber and James Garvin, the surviving crew members who had been riding the engine. Conductor Jacob Hames and Switchman Ed Marschinke had been riding in the caboose, at the rear of the fifteen-car train, too far removed to have witnessed Cramer's actions directly. In the late 1960s John Winter worked essentially the same train as that to which Charles Cramer had been assigned.

In 1934 the Chicago Great Western Railway acquired the St. Paul Bridge and Terminal Railway Company. The Chicago & North Western Railway took over the CGW in 1968. But many of the work routines remained the same. Winter remembers that his last task was to cross the river to the Hoffman Avenue yard on the Ramsey County side via the swing bridge, pick up cars of stock delivered by the Milwaukee Road and Great Northern railroads from the west, and then pass over the bridge again, delivering them to the stockyards, a routine repeated for generations. Often in a hurry to finish the last move of the night, the train crews did

not always relish having to take the extra time to route compressed air from the engine through the cars, which would assure that the air brakes on each car were functional. Perhaps that is what happened in the early morning of October 12, 1912. Willa Cramer's legal complaint also alleged that there had been a failure "to have (the) train brake system properly connected together." Simply relying on the locomotive brakes to control the speed of the train for the short trip across the river would normally be more than sufficient, but for an emergency stop such as Engineer Cramer must have attempted at the last moment, the difference in stopping time may have made the fatal difference.

Or perhaps the "Ten Spot" simply carried bad luck along with it. In October, 1909, just weeks after the new swing bridge was placed in service and almost three years to the day before Charles Cramer's fatal accident, Engine No. 10 jumped the track at the east end of bridge and rolled over, landing upside down twenty feet below. Thomas Bird, a forty-five-year-old switchman, was caught under the engine and killed. Other members of the crew were severely injured. The locomotive was retrieved and placed

back in service, operating until it plunged off the bridge a second time in 1912. Once again it was recovered and repaired. This time it remained in use until 1948, when the resilient "Ten Spot" was finally scrapped for good, its fate in the end sealed, not by errant bridges, but by dieselization and new technology.

Just One More Casualty

The vivid images of the 1912 wreck, preserved in the files of the law firm of Davis, Kellogg and Severance, who represented the railroad when Willa Cramer filed suit under the newly minted Federal Employer Liability Act, and the drama of the abrupt transition from rail to river by a seventy-ton engine and eight cars loaded with hundreds of animals, readily bring the events of this story to the foreground. But statistically, Charles Cramer's death in 1912 was simply recorded as one more casualty in the army of labor. That year 1,182 railroad train and enginemen were killed on the job, averaging more than three deaths each day of the year. Out of a quarter of a million railroad operating employees, who typically worked for the national railroads between the 1880s and the 1950s, about one in 200 would die each year, suffering what was almost in-

variably a gruesome and painful death, burned in boiler explosions, dismembered in derailments and falls off moving equipment, or crushed in collisions.

Financial compensation for these tragedies, if it could be obtained at all, came slowly and the results were not large. Women, who inevitably were the primary adult survivors when members of this all-male workforce were killed, had limited employment opportunities and usually few financial resources. Charles Cramer's estate consisted of a watch and some clothing appraised at \$100 and \$65 due in wages from the railroad. Willa Cramer, whose interests were represented by the notable St. Paul attorney Pierce Butler, ultimately settled out of court for the sum of \$4,500, about equal to two-and-a-half year's wages for Charles. Out of this modest sum she paid her attorney \$1,250, and expended \$275 for funeral expenses, and \$175 for the headstone on her husband's grave. After all debts had been paid, Willa received, finally, after matters had lingered for two years in probate, exactly \$2,618.

Trains still pass over the swing bridge at South St. Paul, and the fog comes in periodically to blanket the river basin. As far as can be determined, no locomotive has tumbled from the bridge since 1912, although reports of some close calls are periodically circulated among railroad employees. After ninety-one years, the only warning on the approach to the bridge span remains an unilluminated red board about eighteen inches square.

David Riehle is a labor historian and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.

Notes on Sources

The retelling of this story began with the accidental discovery of a file on the Cramer case in the extensive collection of papers from the mighty Davis, Kellogg and Severance law firm held at the Minnesota Historical Society. Cushman K. Davis, Frank B. Kellogg and Cordenio Severance are all, of course, familiar names in state and county history, as attorneys and contenders for public office, serving variously as United States sena-

tors, governors, and, in Kellogg's case, presidential cabinet member. Their firm represented many Minnesota corporations in the early twentieth century.

The Cramer case file contains many of the photos that illustrate this article, as well as relevant legal briefs and correspondence between the parties [MHS File 147.B.18.15(b) Box 46, Case No.3010]. Other photographs were obtained from the Dakota County Historical Society and the collections of John Winter.

Carl Sandburg's "Fog," and "Under The Harvest Moon" were written contemporaneously with the events described in the article. Originally published in Sandburg's 1916 collection, "Chicago Poems," they were composed at a time when Sandburg celebrated the surging labor and socialist movements of the early twentieth century in poems such as "Chicago," and "I Am the People, The Mob."

Contemporary accounts of the wreck were carried in daily newspapers. Especially useful were the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Daily News*, as well as the *South St. Paul Daily Reporter* and the *Minneapolis Journal*.

The Dakota County Historical Society's collections furnished some additional photos of the St. Paul Bridge and Terminal Railway's Engine No. 10, as well as an obituary for Fireman Frank Weber, and useful background material

on South St. Paul railroad and stockyards operations.

The disposition of Charles Cramer's estate is documented in Dakota County Probate Court File No. 278 C. Other personal information was obtained from Charles and Willa's death records, available at the Minnesota Historical Society, and a visit to Forest Lawn Cemetery in St. Paul. *St. Paul City Directories*, as well as the federal census for 1900, 1910, and 1920 provided additional data.

The Pioneer Press (October 17, 1909) and the *Daily Reporter* (October 19, 1909) carried reports of Engine No. 10's first fall from the swing bridge and Thomas Bird's death.

Exhibit No. 43, "Employees Exhibits," from the fifteen-volume Record of Arbitration between the Western Railroads and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1914 documented mortality statistics for railroad workers at that time.

Finally, John Winter generously agreed to be interviewed about his memory of the oral traditions concerning the accident, as well as sharing material from his extensive library of railroad historical data, providing a living continuum between the long-forgotten photos, legal documents and other material and the present.



The last days. Engine No. 10 at the Chicago & Great Western State Street yards in St. Paul, June, 1948.

THESE KIDS WON'T HAVE SMALLPOX

* * * *

* * * *

Hundreds Take Advantage of School Holiday to Get Vaccinated at City Hall



Photograph from the St. Paul Daily News for November 5, 1924. Minnesota Historical Society, Collections. See article beginning on page 10.

R.C.H.S.

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