

# The Liggie

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## **LVRR TRAIN WRECK DOMINATES FRONT PAGES OF 1912 PITTSBURG PRESS**

On July 6 and 7, 1912, the front pages of the Pittsburg Press were filled with articles about the tragic train wreck on the LVRR Mill Creek line. Headlines, such as "23 Dead, 31 Injured in Ligonier Tragic Wreck," "Railroad's Manager Overwhelmed," "Ligonier Hushed by Terrible Calamity," and "Supernatural Fears Grip Aged Residents of Ligonier Valley," dramatized the tragedy, grabbing the attention of readers.

Much of the reporting focused on the ironies involved with the accident. If only the passenger train had left seconds earlier, it would have rounded the curve in time to avert the collision, if only the trains had not met at the only spot along the line where visibility was impossible, if only the accident had occurred at another time, the train would not have been filled to capacity with people returning from holiday excursions or children expecting to pick wildflowers.

Even the location of the accident was shocking. The wreck took place at the fairgrounds near the judges' stand, a place that most of the people in the valley associated with laughter, happy days, and good times. People thought it unfathomable that such a tragedy could occur near Ligonier, "pretty to the point of loveliness," where "pretty shaded streets" made the "gruesome bodies" hauled through them all the more "hideous."

Readers were captivated by anecdotes of the accident that portrayed human nature at its worst as well as its best. Ed Nicely, the only eye witness to the accident, who rushed to Ligonier to report the accident and seek help, refused to be interviewed without compensation, saying "I am the only eye-witness and I think I should make something out of it," and later submitted a bill to the LVRR for his assistance in helping the victims after the accident. In contrast, Esther M. Matthews was praised as a heroine in her attempt to save the children she was accompanying that day. "The noble young nurse, who forgot her own danger in efforts to save the lives of the children in her

charge," sustained life-threatening injuries. The passenger train engineer struggled to reverse his train rather than jump to safety when he saw that a collision was about to occur. He, as well as Matthews, did survive but easily could have been among the fatalities.

Even the dramatic journalistic style of writing typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century heightened the interest of readers. Men were described as "whispering in low tones," women "too highly strung to cry" could only "weep," and people gathered "in stricken homes, administering lotions of comforting words to bereaved mothers." "Even the trees whisper[ed]" of the "horror in shivering tones."

Excerpts taken from one of the July 7 articles also poetically portray the accident and its aftermath. James Farrell wrote that "the frantic despair of people keyed to the highest pitch of excitement by the unprecedented onslaught of death . . . characterized . . . the entire valley . . . when two great hog engines with the weight of four score heavy steel freight cars behind, crowded into the frail passenger coach with a message of death . . . But 24 hours after the accident, "A hush has fallen over the town. It is the silent, suffering acceptance of the calamity . . . The full extent of the death-dealing, crushing catastrophe is a matter of history, . . . and now the little mountain town is quiet — a respectful, awesome absence of noise." Such poetic language drew the reader into the tragic drama and made the collision of the two trains that much more horrible.

The articles on the front pages of the July 6 and 7, 1912 Pittsburg Press were filled with names and places, facts and suppositions, hearsay and sworn testimony, all of which were intended to sell newspapers. Today the articles serve as an important record of one of the worst train wrecks in United State history. But for the people living in Ligonier Valley at the time and others involved either directly or indirectly in the accident, no written record was necessary. The accident and all the tragedy that resulted because of it were forever etched in their memories.

## GRANDDAUGHTER DONATES PHOTOGRAPH OF COAL TRAIN CONDUCTOR HARRY H. KNOX

Nancy Truitt-Burkett is the granddaughter of Harry H. Knox, the conductor of the coal train traveling south to Ligonier on the day of the 1912 train accident on the Ligonier line. One hundred years after the accident Truitt-Burkett has donated to the LVRR Museum a picture of her grandfather dressed in his conductor's uniform. Knox, 40 years old at the time of the accident, survived and continued to work for the railroad for several more years. The LVRR is indebted to Truitt-Burkett for generously donating such an important family portrait to the museum.

*Harry Knox,  
age 40,  
was the  
conductor of  
the freight  
train  
involved in  
the 1912  
accident.*



### CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**June 30 – Field trip to retrace the Mill  
Creek branch**

**April 27 – 2013 Layout tour**

## CONTROVERSIAL ERROR LEADS TO LVRR CHANGE IN PROCEDURE

As the conductor of the coal train, Harry H. Knox was a central player in the events leading up to the 1912 train wreck. On July 5, Knox called the LVRR dispatcher to request permission to over-ride the schedule of the passenger train. He had had difficulty assembling the cars on the train and was behind schedule, so much so, that his engines were on the verge of running out of water, essential for generating steam to operate the engine. Only after he received permission from the dispatcher did he release his train for the 12-minute ride into Ligonier. Minutes later, Knox's train collided with the passenger train being pushed north from Ligonier. In the caboose, Knox was totally unaware of the impending doom until the collision occurred. Knox survived the accident, but his injuries required him to be hospitalized.

Charles Kuhn, the passenger train conductor, also survived the accident. Kuhn was in the coach car that was being pushed by an engine. When his train rounded the only blind curve at Denny's Flats, he saw the oncoming coal train and realized that a collision was imminent. Kuhn managed to leap off the train, but sustained several broken bones. The collision tragically resulted in the deaths of 23 people and at least 30 more injured. Although Kuhn acknowledged having received the verbal order to hold his train until the coal train from Wilpen had cleared the track, some miscommunication between the dispatcher and Kuhn led Kuhn to believe the train referred to by the dispatcher was already sitting on the tracks in Ligonier. As a result, Kuhn directed his engineer to proceed to Wilpen.

Subsequent court proceedings attempted to establish blame for the accident. In the end, neither conductor was charged, but the LVRR was found liable due to its reliance on verbal orders rather than written-orders. As a result, the LVRR was held accountable for all claims made by the victims.

## 2012 FIELD TRIP TO RETRACE THE LVRR'S MILL CREEK BRANCH AND SITE OF THE 1912 ACCIDENT

Friends of the LVRR are invited to participate in the 2012 field trip that will retrace the 5.6 mile Mill Creek branch of the LVRR on Saturday June 30. A caravan of automobiles will assemble at 10 a.m. in the parking lot behind the Ligonier Valley School District administration building on West Main Street. A fee of \$10 will be charged for non-members.

Several stops will be made along the Mill Creek branch where numerous traces of the roadbed are still readily apparent. Stops will include the site where the railroad bridge spanned Mill Creek, the locations of various spur lines which serviced local mines and coke ovens, the site of the 1912 train wreck, the roadbed of the Ligonier Lumber Company Railroad, and the Fort Palmer coke ovens.

Please call 724-537-2647 by June 23 to make a reservation.

### LAUREL HIGHLANDS SPONSORS BACKYARD TOUR

On April 17, 45 employees of member organizations of the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau toured the LVRR Museum and other historical sites in Westmoreland County as part of a promotional program. Every year the bureau offers employees of member organizations the opportunity to visit and familiarize themselves with other tourist attractions within the Laurel Highlands. The objective behind this program is to increase tourism in the region by having member organizations promote each other.



*The first motor coach to navigate the parking area of the LVRR Museum*

## DRESS AND GET-WELL CARDS DONATED TO MUSEUM



*Mary Lou Mitchell and her daughter Pam Stablein display the dress Bessie Hoon wore the day of the accident.*

The family of Bessie Hoon, the 16-year old survivor of the 1912 train wreck on the Ligonier line, recently requested that the dress Hoon was wearing the day of the accident be given to the Ligonier Valley Rail Road Museum.

Prior to the organization of the LVRRRA, Hoon's daughter, Mary Lou Mitchell, and granddaughters, Pam Stablein and Cheryl Mitchell, donated the dress to the Ligonier Valley Historical Society. After the LVRR Museum opened in 2010, the family, believing the dress more appropriately belonged at the railroad museum, requested the LVHS relinquish the dress to the LVRRRA.

On March 29, 2012, the LVHS graciously presented the dress to the LVRR Museum with representatives of the Hoon family present.

Mitchell also donated the get-well cards that her mother received while recuperating from her injuries. Both the dress and the cards will be on display in the museum in the near future.

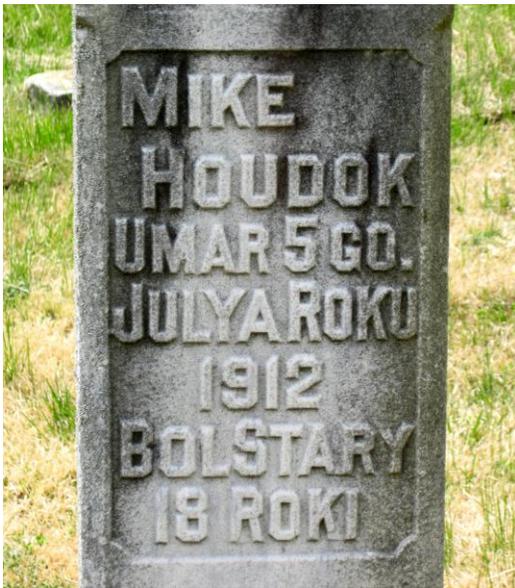
### E-VERSION OF THE LIGGIE

If you prefer to access the newsletter in electronic format rather than to receive a hard copy, please notify the office at 724-238-7819 or send an e-mail to [lorra@verizon.net](mailto:lorra@verizon.net).

## RESEARCHING THE 1912 LIGONIER VALLEY RAIL ROAD ACCIDENT

Bill Potthoff is chairing a committee to research and record information pertaining to the 1912 train wreck on the Mill Creek branch of the LVRR. One of the current projects is to verify the identities and the spelling of the names of everyone involved in the accident. Sources being consulted include the 1910 census records, obituaries, newspaper accounts, LVRR records and legal papers, and the tombstones of the victims.

Along with the correct spelling of names, tombstones sometimes provide additional information. For instance, the committee is now looking for someone who can translate what is written on Mike Houdok's monument, which is pictured below. Anyone able to do so is asked to call the office at 724-238-7819. Houdok was a passenger on the LVRR train.



The committee has also begun to research why each person was on the train that day. The Pittsburg Press reported that several children on the train, including the granddaughter of the general manager of the railroad, George Senft, were on their way to pick flowers in the countryside. Two of these children, daughters of Henry and Sarah Rhody, died in the accident. Bessie Hoon, one of the survivors, was on her way to visit an aunt in Wilpen. Mat Nieport was returning to his home in Wilpen after spending seven weeks in the Westmoreland Hospital recuperating from a broken leg he suffered in a mining accident. Nieport died in the accident.

Once the committee has gathered as much information as possible about the accident, the crew and the passengers, it will share its findings with the public. In addition to Potthoff, the committee includes Mimi Owens, Peggy Gideon, Bob Stutzman and Regina Brinza.

### LVRRA NAMES THE WINNER OF AD CONTEST PROMOTED BY THE LATROBE BULLETIN

The LVRR Museum chose Christopher Cox, a 10-year-old fourth-grade student at Latrobe Elementary School (LES), as the winner of an ad campaign initiated by the Latrobe Bulletin. His drawing of an engine with weighted drive wheels, which add to a train's momentum, reveals his knowledge of steam engines. He also cleverly used the steam emitting from the smokestack as a bubble in which to convey promotional information to attract visitors to the museum.

In conjunction with the art department of LES, the Latrobe Bulletin published a *Design An Ad* tabloid, which featured ads created by students and sponsored by various local businesses and organizations.



This ad by Christopher Cox is just one of several chosen as winners of the ad campaign sponsored by the Latrobe Bulletin.

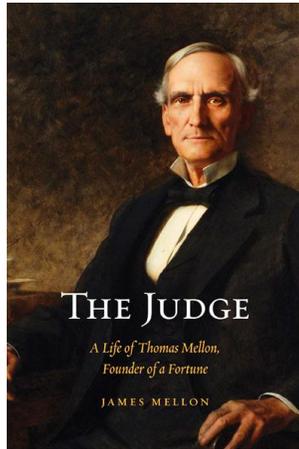
*The Liggie* is published quarterly  
for Friends of the LVRR.  
Editor — Bob Stutzman  
Associate Editor — Carolyn H. Dillon

## LIBRARIES HOST DISCUSSIONS OF THOMAS MELLON BIOGRAPHY

The Westmoreland Library Network and Westmoreland Heritage annually choose a contemporary book pertaining to Westmoreland County history to be used as the subject of discussion in the public libraries of Westmoreland County. Each library receives 20 copies of the book to loan to interested readers. A schedule listing dates and times for each discussion group is available at the 15 participating libraries. The program began on May 2 at the Ligonier Valley Library and will continue through August 8.

The book chosen for 2012 is The Judge, A Life of Thomas Mellon, Founder of a Fortune, written by great-grandson James Mellon. It tells the story of an immigrant farm boy who, inspired by Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, chose to leave the family farm near Export when he was 17 to seek his fortune.

A follow-up program and bus tour for those participating in the discussion groups will take place on August 18. The tour will include a visit to Unity Chapel and Cemetery and the Ligonier Valley Rail Road Museum. Both of these sites have extensive Mellon family connections.



### NEW MEMBERS SINCE MARCH 1, 2012

Jay and Meri Beth Elder  
 Peter & Ginny Fitzner  
 Roger Melville  
 Chad McMullen  
 Cheryl Mitchell  
 Audrey Tostevin

**Friend forever – in memorial**

**Nancy McLeary**

## FOURTH ANNUAL LAYOUT TOUR MEETS EXPECTATIONS

Many model railroad fans turned out for LVRRA's fourth annual layout tour on April 28. The self-guided tour featured eight layouts, ranging in size from N gauge to 7-1/2 inch gauge. The event attracted 270 participants, who visited six locations extending from Harrison City to Ligonier.

*Gauge Chart*

Gauge	Scale	Inches Between Rails
7.5	1:8	7.500"
G	1:24	1.772"
O	1:48	1.250"
HO	1:87	0.650"
N	1:160	0.354"
Z	1:220	0.256"

In Harrison City, Harold Kopp displayed two layouts in his train room. His N gauge layout, built with the help of two grandchildren, features two loops of track on multiple levels, tunnel portals, a trestle and two girder bridges.

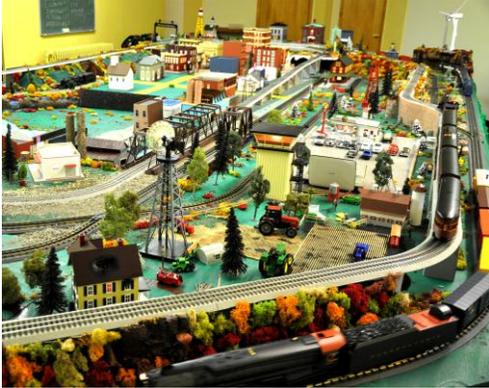


*Harold Kopp's N gauge 4' X 5' layout includes both town and industrial scenes.*

Kopp built his HO layout over a period of several years. It includes multiple levels, an engine house, both a girder and trestle bridge, electrical substation and a coal loading tipple. Kopp's wife, Florian, also displayed her doll house and a collection of Christmas ornaments for tour visitors to enjoy.

A men's group from the Jeannette Lutheran church pooled resources to build an extensive layout on the third floor of the Christian education wing of its church. The 12' X 24' O gauge layout accommodates six trains operating on two levels. Several boys in the local Boy Scout troop helped to landscape the layout and construct some of the buildings to earn credit toward their railroad merit badges. The co-leaders of the men's group, Tom Werner

and Rich Gongaware, are especially proud to have a Blue Comet and a Steeler train as part of their layout.



*The men of the Jeannette Lutheran church employ a digital-control system to operate their MTH layout.*

At Chuck Kapalka's home in Greensburg, in spite of the predicted rain showers, more than 200 guests on the tour rode rail cars pulled by one of two steam engines operating on Kapalka's 7-1/2" gauge track.



*Tony Mastrococco emerges from a cloud of steam.*

Kapalka, a retired machinist, installed the track for his replica Shay engine some time ago. Although he was unable to finish his engine in time for the tour, Kapalka's friends Joe and Tony Mastrococco and Randy Ross were more than happy to bring their engines to transport visitors on Kapalka's track.



*Kapalka's unfinished Shay engine replicates Pittsburg, Westmoreland and Somerset's engine #395.*

At Huber Hall in Latrobe, the Pittsburgh Independent Hi-Railers assembled a 30' X 40' modular four-track O gauge layout. The various modules depict an operating drive-in movie (made possible with a laptop computer serving as the projection screen), a UFO crash site, a canyon, a trestle bridge and additional recreational and industrial sites found along a typical rail line.

*Children wait in line to operate the trains with remote controllers.*



*Young model railroaders are spellbound by the extensive layout of the Pittsburgh Independent Hi-Railers.*

A modular layout built by members of the Steeltown N-Scalers was also on display in Huber Hall. Drawing much attention was the "corkscrew" loop, which reverses the direction of the trains on the layout. Trains enter the module on a single track and navigate several loops before exiting on that same line.



*Ralph Scalise and grandson Dante check out the "corkscrew" return at one end of the Steeltown N Scalers' modular layout.*

In addition, at Huber Hall members of the Terrell M. Jacobs Ring #7, an affiliate of the

Circus Model Builders, exhibited their hand-crafted displays of circus tents, side shows and a Main Street parade, all representative of the 1930s.

*This side-show model advertises classic circus attractions, such as an electric woman, rubber man and a snake charmer.*



Duane Miller, a Friend of the LVRR and member of the Circus Model Builders, also displayed his personal collection of circus trains, ranging in gauges from N through G.



*Miller describes his collection of circus trains as being "colorful and different looking than most trains."*

In Ligonier, Walt Johnson shared his 4' X 12' N gauge layout that includes five trains operating on three levels. Incorporated in his layout are various tunnels, bridges, a camping scene in the foothills of a mountain and a golf course community.



*Walt Johnson's hobbies of camping, golfing and model railroading are all incorporated into his N Gauge layout.*

For the first time, the LVRR Museum, located at the restored Darlington Station, was included in the tour, resulting in a large number of first-time visitors becoming aware of this historic tourist attraction in Ligonier Valley. Since this fundraiser is quite popular and financially beneficial to the LVRR, plans are already in progress for the 2013 tour.



*This HO model of a railroad wye demonstrates how engines can turn around without using a turntable.*

### **CABOOSE RESTORATION PROJECT IS UNDERWAY**

Funding to refurbish the caboose has been provided through a grant awarded by the Ligonier Endowment and a contribution made by an anonymous benefactor. St. Clair Construction has already replaced the roof and one side of the caboose. Volunteers have also finished dismantling the metal railings, steps, ladders, and brake wheels on both ends of the caboose.



*Chad McMullen, owner of St. Clair Construction, is shown here reframing the roof of the caboose.*

Members of the board are in the process of hiring someone to sandblast and repaint the metal components. Once this phase of the restoration is complete, the caboose will be open to visitors this summer.

## RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS

*Thanks to all contributors for the following items that have been donated to the LVRRRA since the last Liggie publication:*

**Walter Berko** — Photograph of LVRR engine #4025

**Virginia Fitzner** — Panoramic photograph of Ligonier by W. T. Brown, circa 1914

**Harry Frye** — Enlarged photograph (13" X 30") of LVRR engine #594, taken on the 1952 rail-fan trip at the quarry tipple in the Loyalhanna Gorge

**Bill Koch** — Original Railway Express Agency sign

**Ligonier Valley Historical Society** (at the request of Bessie Hoon's descendants) — Dress worn by survivor Bessie Hoon on the day of the 1912 train wreck on the Ligonier line

**Fran Lynch** — Collection of date nails once used by railroads to identify the placement date of railroad ties, and two publications explaining the need and the use of date nails

**David and Molly Miller** — Vintage pennants from Idlewild Park and Fort Ligonier

**Mary Lou Mitchell** — Collection of get-well cards sent to Bessie Hoon, Mitchell's mother, as Hoon was recuperating in the hospital from her injuries sustained in the 1912 train wreck on the Ligonier line

**Bill Potthoff** — Two books, Dining By Rail (1993) and From the Dining Car (2004) by James D. Porterfield

**Dave Somerville** — Railroad map of Pennsylvania, published by the Department of Internal Affairs

**Nancy Truitt-Burkett** — Photograph of her grandfather Harry H. Knox, the conductor of the freight train involved in the 1912 wreck, the "lunch box" that he carried to work every day and a souvenir reprint of the July 10, 1912, edition of The Ligonier Echo

## THE MISSION OF THE LVRRRA Ligonier Valley Rail Road Association Organized in 2004:

**To Preserve** the legacy of the LVRR

**To Conserve** vestiges of the LVRR

**To Collect** memorabilia of the LVRR

**To Educate** the public about the history of railroading in Ligonier Valley

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