

Wreck of the Old 97 - Annotated

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

On September 27, 1903 Southern Railway's fast mail train, "Old 97" approached Danville, Virginia running way too fast, left the tracks on the sharp curve leading to Stillhouse Trestle and crashed into the rocky and muddy streambed of Stillhouse Creek 45 feet below. Of the 18 men on board, eleven died and seven were injured.



This photograph was taken several days after the wreck. The engine has been uncovered and righted. I have ridden the whole route of Old 97, from Monroe to Danville, on my motorcycle and visited the site of the wreck. The trestle is long gone, but there is an historical marker on the little bridge going over Stillhouse Creek.

File Photo

As train wrecks go, this was pretty spectacular. People came from miles around to see the carnage and help as they could. Newspaper articles spread the story around the country complete with pictures of the wreck and vivid accounts of the gruesome scene. Eyewitnesses told and retold the story of what they had seen and heard, indelibly seared into their memories.

Though authorship was later claimed, the song probably evolved over time in the folk tradition. From the stories and accounts came verses and poems; then someone sang the verses to an old tune familiar to every one of that time and place. The tune was that of *The Ship that Never Returned*, a popular song written by Henry Clay Work shortly after the War Between the States. The tune and refrain ("Did she ever return? She never returned, and her fate is yet unlearned ...") provided the structure of a number of songs, notably *The Train that Never Returned* ("did she ever pull in? No she never pulled in, and her fate is still unlearned ...") and *The MTA Song* ("Did he ever return? No he never returned ..."). Work is best known today as the composer of *Grandfather's Clock*. The verses fit the tune and told the story in a way that was easily remembered and passed on. Musicians and performers refined the lyrics and tune and it became popular throughout the area.

Almost 20 years after the wreck, the song was polished, condensed and recorded by Henry Whitter, a local musician. Vernon Dalhart, an opera singer from New York, heard the Whitter recording, transcribed the words as well as he could understand them and recorded *The Wreck on the Southern Old 97* - first for the Edison Talking Machine Company and then

for the Victor Talking Machine Company. The Dalhart recording, complete with misunderstood words, became the first record to sell over a million copies and ultimately sold over five million. This success and the prospect of monetary rewards led to several claims of authorship and the first copyright lawsuit in the history of American music, and it went all of the way to the Supreme Court. Since then, there have been numerous versions of the song performed and recorded. I personally like the rendition performed by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. Here are the words followed by commentary.

*Well they gave him his orders in Monroe, Virginia
Saying Steve, you're way behind time
This is not 38 but it's old 97
You must put her into Spencer on time*

Fast Mail Train 97 left Washington, DC over an hour behind schedule because connecting trains were late. Monroe, a few miles north of Lynchburg, is on a division boundary of the Southern Railway, and by rule a fresh crew took over with instructions, explicit or implicit, to make up at least some of the lost time.

The engineer was 33 year-old Joseph Broady from Saltville, an experienced engineer with a reputation for being able to run a fast train. True to railroad tradition he supposedly was given the nickname “Steve” suggesting that he was somewhat of a risk-taker. Steve Broady was a well-known daredevil of the time who supposedly was the first to jump off of the Brooklyn Bridge and survive. Joe Broady was an experienced and competent engineer. He had made the trip between Monroe and Danville many times, hauling freight. This was his first run on Old 97 and the first time he had operated engine 1102.



Steam engine number 1102 was delivered to Southern Railway barely a month before the wreck of Old 97. She was repaired at Spencer Shops and was in service for another 32 years. File Photo

Old 97 refers to the lucrative mail route and the train running it - consisting, in this case, of an engine with tender, two postal cars, an express car and one baggage car. The fast mail train was under contract to deliver mail on time and there were substantial penalties for each minute it was late getting into Spencer. Fast mail had track priority over all other trains. The steam locomotive, number 1102, was a brand new Baldwin ten-wheeler (4-6-0) with four truck or leading wheels and six large drive wheels, each almost six feet in diameter.

The orders received in Monroe were “run-late” orders instructing the engineer to run 45 minutes late into Lynchburg and 40 minutes late into Danville. In other words, Broady was ordered not to arrive in Danville before the run-late time and he was only *allowed*, not

required, to make up 28 minutes on the run to Danville. He would then receive run-late orders for the leg from Danville to Spencer.

Spencer, just South of Lexington, North Carolina, was built as a railroad town and named after the president of the Southern Railway. Spencer Shops consisted of a large roundhouse, repair shops and foundries for building and repairing steam locomotives. The complex is now a transportation museum and well worth a visit when you go to Lexington for barbecue.

***Well, he turned around and said to his fireman
Shovel in a little more coal
And when we cross this big White Mountain
We'll watch old 97 roll***

After leaving Lynchburg Old 97 roared southward through Franklin Junction (now Gretna) and on through Chatham Station without slowing. At Dry Fork, five miles below Chatham and at the base of White Oak Mountain, the mail clerks threw the mailbag from the speeding train, but were unable to grab the mail pouch hanging from the suspension arm at the depot. White Oak is more of a hill than a mountain and was no challenge for the powerful 1102 pulling only four cars and its' coal tender.

***It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville
And lined on a three-mile grade
It's on that grade that he lost his airbrakes
You see what a jump he made***

The correct verse here is "from Lima's it's a three-mile grade". Lima was a small freight depot three miles north of the trestle with an average downhill grade of 1.5%. We will never know why Broady did not, or could not brake the train before Stillhouse Trestle. A loss of pressure in the brake system is the most likely explanation as referenced in the song. To make up time, engineers often ran fast to a turn, applied the brakes and then accelerated through. If applied too often, the brake system would lose "average" pressure. The term "he lost his average" appears in some versions of the song, though it is an unlikely scenario. Surviving mail clerks testified that Broady never applied the brakes between Lynchburg and Lima. If he planned to brake on the grade leading to the trestle and discovered that he had no pressure, there was little he could do to slow the train in time.

***They were goin' down the grade makin' 90 mile an hour
When his whistle broke into a scream
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
Was scalded to death by the steam***

Ninety miles an hour is probably a gross exaggeration, though engine 1102 was certainly capable of that speed, especially on a downhill grade. Sixty is more realistic and seems to be the consensus of eyewitnesses and experts. Everyone who saw or heard Old 97 barreling down the grade with whistle blowing knew that the run-away train was in trouble and would never make the turn to the trestle. Just before she left the tracks a great cloud of dust arose

and sparks were seen coming from the driving wheels – Broady was evidently trying to reverse the engine, a desperate and futile effort. He was not found with his hand on the throttle as his body was found badly burned and lying in Stillhouse Branch, some distance from the cab.

Amidst the death and destruction, an eerie and surreal scene greeted those who came to look or help - hundreds of brightly colored canaries circled over the carnage, chirping and singing. Several crates of the birds were in the express car and broke open in the crash. Canaries were used in coal mines as indicators of poisonous gasses: if the canary died, miners knew that they had to get to fresh air - fast.

*Then the telegram come to Washington city and this is how it read
The brave engineer that run old 97 is lying in old Danville dead
Now all you ladies ye take warning from this time now and learn
Never speak harsh words to your true loving husband
He may leave you and never return*

This final warning to wives and lovers, repeated in many tragic ballads of the time, is from *The Parted Lovers*, another parody of *The Ship that Never Returned*.



This is our portable barbecue pit, aptly named “Old 97” because it looks like an old steam engine, especially when fired up and cooking. The man I bought it from said that it had been made in Hampton, Virginia in a shop that makes sea-going barges, and that it was made of heavy, high-quality marine grade steel and stainless. He also told me that it had been designed by an engineer: I allowed as how I could probably make it work anyhow. After \$1000.00 worth of welding and modifications, she will cook anything – as long as you keep her well stoked. Photo by Dan Gill

© Dan Gill - Published in Pleasant Living September - October '11
Something Different Country Store and Deli www.pine3.info