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President's Report to Members

Here it is early September and the mild summer days are now happening here in the Mid-Atlantic region; but now it is time to write my closing of the year letter. We had two successful Mini-Cons and an outstanding convention. I thank Andy White, Mike Lytle, and Bill Kramer for time and efforts to make these events successful. Next year, John Howard is leading the efforts for the Western Mini-Con and Andy White is handling the Eastern Mini-Con and the Cincinnati Convention in 2023. If you could do a presentation, contact them or me and we will get you on the agenda.

For those who miss the *B&O Modeler*, there is an article in this issue on John Holt's B&O railroad on the West End. For years I worked with John on this longtime project. Most of the scenery was done by me and several structures. John loved his representation of B&O's West End. Almost every morning he would take his coffee down to his model empire and watch his trains run through his view of the West Virginia mountains. John was excellent structure builder, and the pictures in this issue demonstrate his skill. With future issues we have dedicated pages to show accurate prototype B&O models. Contributions are needed so send them to me through the society's post office box. By the way, there is still a need for an editor for the *B&O Modeler*.

This past election director Tom Dupee stepped down due to his effort on historical preservation in his neighborhood. Tom,

thank you for contribution to the society. Dave Ori from Ohio was elected as our new director. Dave, welcome to the leadership team. As for the bylaw change on the ballot, it has passed. Because of new requirements in Maryland for Sales Tax Exemption Law, this new wording had to be added. The paperwork is complete and we still have our tax exemption.

Publications are slowly moving with the Food Service Car book being hit with another hurdle. For months Joe Nevin was working with Bill Howes on completing the book. Bill passed away and created a great void in B&O passenger operation history. Bill promised high resolution images of passenger car images from his collection. As of this writing there is no clarity of what is going on with Bill Howes's collection or its current location. Due to the new delay on the Food Service Car book, I have asked Nick Fry to accelerate his effort to get the St. Louis Division book done. He hopes to have draft chapters by this Fall. Dave Ori has volunteered to work on the Akron Division Book. Another member also volunteered to write this book, but I have misplaced the name; I am sorry. Please contact me again so we can hook you up with Dave. The 2023 calendar is available for sale and Henry Freeman has almost completed the 2024. Since the dues increase there has been a reduction in sustaining members. Therefore, the press run of 2024 calendars will be reduced to keep expenses down.

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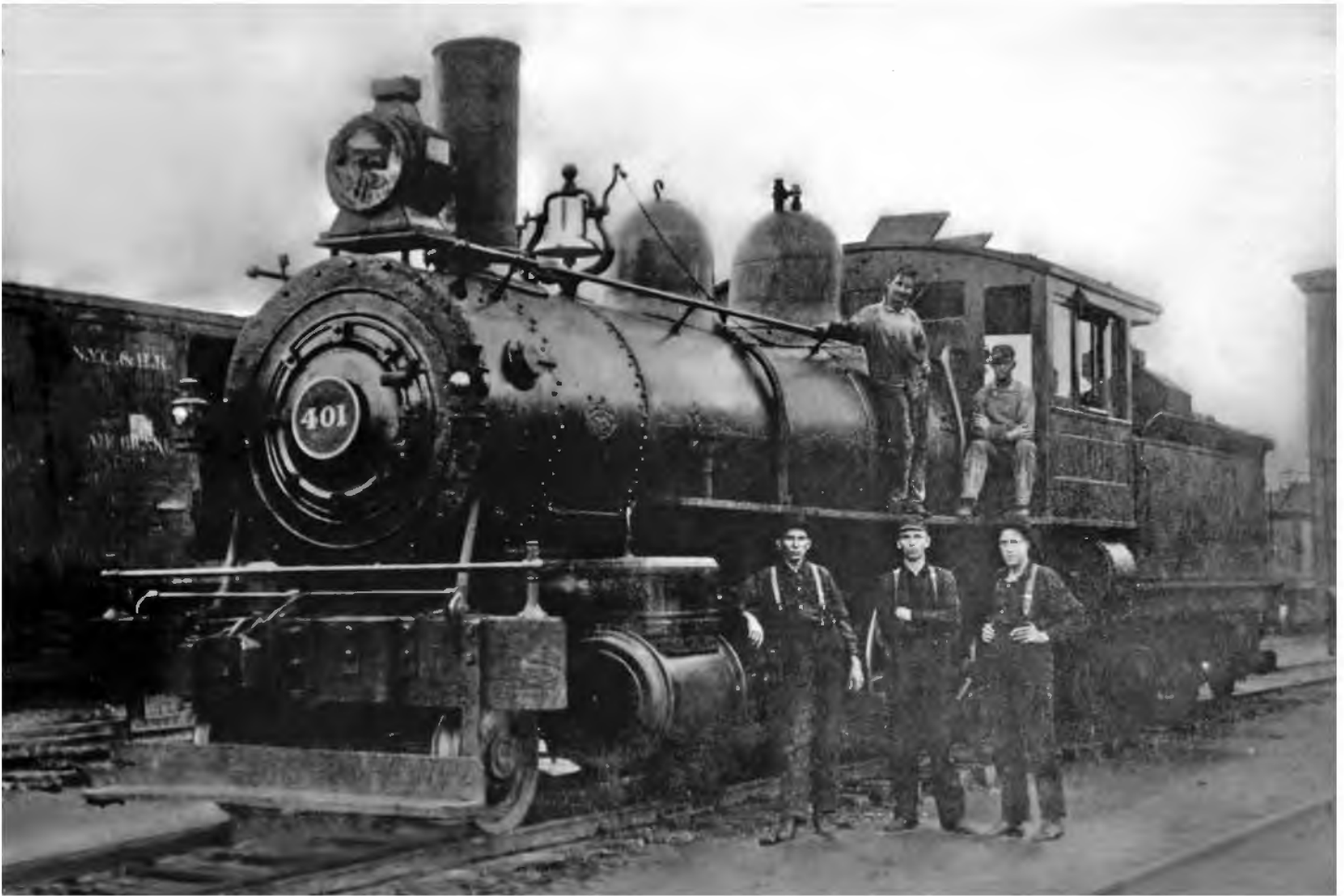
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On the Front Cover

September 11, 2022 marked the 50th anniversary of the delivery of GM50 to the B&O. In 1972, GM50 was selected by EMD to celebrate its 50th anniversary as a manufacturer of diesel-powered rail equipment, and wore a unique gold color and anniversary logo. (Photograph by Frank Dewey)



Locomotive 401 with a yard crew as it appeared before the accident. Theo Gharst is said to be the man seated in the cab doorway on the fireman's side.

Tragedy and Heroism at Blue Hole

By Chris Palmer

All photographs courtesy of Daviess County Museum

“Following the crash, the twenty odd men who were in the rear boxcar climbed out as rapidly as possible. Their excitement was great until they realized what had just happened and what a narrow escape they had just had. Had not the train broken, their car would have been dragged into the water and all would have been drowned like rats in a trap. A minute later, a stillness had run over the crowd, the cries of those who were perishing floated through the darkness and over the swirling waters. They stood still in their tracks, for fear of what might happen next....The anguished cries of the men floating down the river continued louder and the

men on the embankment were powerless to help them....

“When the big bridge went out shortly after the trestle, the workmen realized their precarious situation. Over sixty men were hemmed in between the river bridge washout and the sunken trestle. There was apparently no means of escape. Who knew but what the entire embankment would go next?

“Their feeling of fear and distress was made all the more ghastly by the cries for help from far downstream....They turned their backs toward the cries, knowing full well they could do nothing for the victims.”

WASHINGTON DEMOCRAT MARCH 28, 1913

March 23, 1913, Easter Sunday, was the beginning of a week filled with a particularly furious display of Mother Nature's ability to wield devastation when so inclined. Nearby, Terre Haute was struck by a deadly tornado. Along with the weather system that brought the tornado came rain...and more rain...and even more rain.

From March 23rd through March 27th, the storm system deposited rainfall totals at some central Indiana locations of 8 to 11+ inches. The White River Watershed lies squarely in the area affected by this devastating amount of rainfall.

According to the United States Weather Bureau, the crest of the floodwaters passed

through the northern headwaters of the river March 25- 26, the central parts March 26-27, and the southern courses March 27-28. The severe flooding caused by this system “cost the lives of scores of people, rendered many thousands homeless, and destroyed property beyond estimate.... The enormous losses (due to flooding) over

such an extended area are unprecedented in the history of this portion of the United States, and it must follow that an occurrence so unusual must have been produced by extraordinary weather conditions.”

The Situation

B&O's tracks traversing the bottomland of the White River west of the city of Washington, Indiana, and B&O's railroad shops, included a three-and-one-half-mile segment built up on a man-made earthen embankment stretching across the floodplains of the river. Similar in construction to a dike or levee, this fill was approximately 18 feet wide and 10-15 feet higher than the surrounding terrain in some places. Contained within this long earthen fill, in a stretch of track known to the local railroaders as the “River Section,” in less than 1.3 miles were three bridges, crossing over three bodies of water. From east to west they were:

Blue Hole: 284-foot wooden trestle

Prairie Creek: single span steel bridge

White River: 450-foot twin-span steel truss bridge

By Thursday March 27th, the rain had subsided, yet the floodwaters, as a result of the enormous amount of rainfall over the region, continued to rise. All the while the raging currents of these waters continued to grow stronger and stronger. B&O's long earthen fill across the river bottom had inadvertently become a dike of sorts, holding back the floodwaters on the north side, functioning much like a dam or levee. The floodwater level on the north side had climbed noticeably higher than the water level south of the fill. The presence of this earthen fill stretched across the bottomland was restricting the surging floodwaters, the three bridges being the only locations allowing the strengthening waters to pass through and follow their natural, unrelenting determination to flow downstream. All three structures had quickly become a type of chokepoint, restricting the flow of the water and creating raging rapids at each location. The continued pounding by the angry currents of the floodwaters rushing against the abutments and supports of these bridges became of great concern. Frequent inspections of them were made. This was now the only rail access still open to the city, the routes north, south,

and east having been closed on account of flooding and washouts at other locations. At Washington, four eastbound passenger trains were stranded, marooning well over 200 hundred people here. These trains were being held at Washington due to the track conditions previously described.

Thursday Afternoon, March 27th

Number 11, a regularly scheduled westbound passenger train to St. Louis, had already received clearance to depart the Washington depot and was just about to roll west when the local telegraph agent, Al Gossett, received word that the bridge at “90 Foot Hole”—the colloquial name among railroaders for the bridge where the railroad crosses Prairie Creek just north of the confluence where it flows into the White River—had been moved about one foot out of alignment due to the force of the churning floodwaters. Quickly he flagged down the train, just as the conductor was signaling a highball to start the train west. Had the train departed, the results may have been catastrophic.

With the news of the displacement of 90 Foot Hole (Prairie Creek), an all-out effort to reinforce the bridge to prevent any further movement was organized by the railroad using local shop forces. If there was to be any hope of preventing it from washing away, and keeping the road open, time was of the essence. No exceptions were reported with either Blue Hole trestle or the White River bridge at this time.

Scores of men, equipment, and materials were dispatched to the scene from Shops (Official name of the B&O's maintenance facilities and classification yard at Washington) by use of a work train shuttling back and forth the few short miles between the west end of Shops and the bridge as needed. The train consisted of B&O yard locomotive number 401 and a few cars necessary for the job. The cars were laden with sandbags and other necessary tools, materials, and supplies needed by the workforce in order to realign and secure the bridge.

Thursday Evening, March 27th

90 Foot Hole (Prairie Creek), sits between the Blue Hole trestle and the White River bridge. In order to reach it from Shops, it was necessary for 401 and its train to cross the trestle at Blue Hole in

both directions. By late Thursday evening, the crew of 401 and its work train were engaged in their sixth trip between Prairie Creek and Shops, supplying the needed sandbags and other essential supplies to the large group of men engaged in battling the rising waters.

401 and its work train had done what they could at the bridge at 90 Foot Hole and started making their way back east toward Shops. The 401 was backing up eastward, with its tender leading, pulling its short train consisting of an empty flat car and two or three boxcars (accounts vary as to the actual consist of the train) attached to the front of the locomotive. It paused just west of the Blue Hole trestle in order for the crew to speak to the bridge foreman before proceeding across and back towards Shops.

At the throttle of number 401 was Theodore Gharst, 36. He had been working for the railroad for over ten years. His 32-year-old fireman, Reason Jackson, had been firing the yard engine for about 4 years. Also in the cab were local supervisors, Carlos G. Stevens, Trainmaster, Daniel L. Shaffer, General Yardmaster, and Clifford McLemore, Night Yardmaster. On the point, riding the footboard of the leading edge of the tender, with an ever watchful eye on the trestle, was switchman Daniel Tucker.

10:50 PM (time indicated, within one minute, on three of the victims watches when recovered)

The only sound that could be heard as the 401 backed out onto the trestle at Blue Hole, tender leading, was the roar of the torrential currents of the floodwaters, pressing through the bents of the trestle. As the locomotive approached the middle of the trestle, witnesses report first hearing the sound of splitting timbers as the trestle suddenly and without warning, collapsed directly under the locomotive. The trestle was described as dropping straight down, resulting in the locomotive and tender being forced together in an action much like closing the blades of a pocket knife, with the tender crushing the locomotive cab where it was coupled. The front of the locomotive pointed skyward as the trestle gave way and it slid into the water. The 401 and its tender, along with the head car were plunged into the murderous currents, taking their occupants with them.

The residents of Maysville, who had been keeping a careful watch on the flooding waters and preparing for the worst, heard the groans and cracking of the splitting trestle timbers, followed by “a crash and a splash.” Soon they heard the victim’s cries for help and quickly set out in row boats towards the pleas, with hopes of rescuing some of the victims.

As the 401 went down, Switchman Tucker clung to the grab iron of the tender, literally for his life, as both he and the tender plummeted—he with his feet being up and his head down. Still grasping the handhold, they then dropped down

deep into the water. According to his statement, he hit bottom, released his grip on the tender and struck his head on a large piece of timber as he came to the surface. He was drawn into the current and using various wreckage and driftwood for flotation devices, he was finally able to grasp a tree branch along Hawkins Creek some three quarters of a mile south of Blue Hole and secure himself in the tree. His cries for help were answered and he was rescued by Maysville resident Hose Nash nearly three hours later, lodged in the tree with the rising waters near his shoulders. Some references state his clothing was beginning to freeze.

Trainmaster Stevens jumped from the window of the fireman’s side of 401’s cab (downstream side) and was pulled under by the current. Upon finally making it back to the surface, he too found timbers and driftwood swirling among the debris flowing downstream and was also able to use them to stay afloat and grasp a tree top along Hawkins Creek. He and Tucker were able to communicate to one another and together they continued to cry for help. He was rescued by Maysville resident J.D. Sturgeon in a rowboat after nearly three hours in the frigid rushing waters. The flood water is



Labeled aerial view of the areas mentioned in this article.

reported to have been over twelve feet deep.

Riding the head car was shopman Otto McClellan. When the trestle gave way, accounts say he was also among those tossed into the turbulent water. Remarkably, as he was not thrown into the direct current, he was able to quickly get back to the edge of the railroad embankment and reach safety. Later, he would make his way up Tom’s Hill with a group of about 30 of his coworkers.

Approximately twenty men were riding in the rearmost boxcar. As the 401 plunged into the water, couplers broke and the train separated between the flat car and the boxcars. The head boxcar flipped onto its side, but remained up on the embankment. It was set afire by the sparks spewing from the locomotive just before it went down. The boxcar burned for hours, with newspaper accounts describing the fire as still illuminating the scene when the relief train arrived at 1:40am, nearly three hours later. Had the couplers not broken and the train separated when the leading equipment was plunged into the water, the boxcar containing the twenty workmen could very well have been pulled into the floodwaters with the rest.

All the while, cries for help from the

victims, fighting for their lives while being carried away downstream, could be heard by both the Maysville residents and the railroad workers left at the scene on the railroad’s earthen fill.

On the embankment, the workmen were powerless to aid their fellow railroaders in the water in any way. They had to focus on their own safety, for fears ran high that the entire earthen fill might soon wash away. They watched as the water continued to rise around them. Being cut off to the east from Shops, they decided to walk west along the railroad, across both the Prairie Creek bridge and the White River bridge to Wheatland.

It was now nearly 45 minutes after the collapse of Blue Hole trestle. Foreman John Jackman led the group of about half of the 60 men still on the embankment west toward Wheatland and high ground. Upon arrival at the White River bridge, he was advised by some members of the Wheatland section gang that the steel bridge spanning the White River was unsafe. Moments later, as the men discussed the situation and Jackman approached the bridge to inspect it, the pounding floodwaters brought the bridge crashing down into the current. Jackman placed the time at 11:35pm. They,



Blue Hole looking west after the accident. The boxcar on the other side is the one many workers were riding in when the portion of the train that was in front of it plunged in to the floodwaters.

along with a work train and a local from the west, were now stranded. Cut off in all directions, there were now 60 or more men on an 18-foot-wide man-made earthen fill approximately 1.3 miles long, completely cut off and surrounded by angry, churning, flood waters, ever rising all the while, threatening to completely wash away the entire embankment. Their situation had become critical.

Early Friday, March 28th Just after Midnight

Meanwhile, word about the trestle collapse had traveled back to Washington. Misinformation and rumors spread through town that possibly over 150 men on the work train had gone down. Ambulances were dispatched to Maysville to assist in the recovery of the many rumored dead and injured. A relief train equipped with a boat for search and rescue was quickly assembled and dispatched to the scene, arriving at about 1:40am. With the rescue of Stevens and Tucker, it was soon learned that only a few men may have gone into the water and the rumors were false.

After the White River bridge was washed away right in front of their eyes, Foreman Jackman and his group took

notice of lights flickering in a house up on high ground at Tom's Hill, about 500 yards north of the railroad. A spur track switch to the grain elevator at Tom's Hill was located a few hundred yards east of the White River bridge. The situation being what it was, Jackman and the gang of workmen with him decided to gamble on attempting to wade through the flood waters up the spur to Tom's Hill and safety. Accounts state they waded in water near their shoulders, but by following the rails of the spur with their feet, they were able to wade through successfully, some thirty-three men in all.

Jackman's group were taken in by Irving Padgett at his home on Tom's Hill. One of the railroaders, switchman C. A. Smith, was reported to have repaired a grounded telephone at the Padgett home and by 4:00am made contact with Washington, thereby providing additional information to the town about the accident and further quelling the rumors of scores of deaths. Another group of about 30 men, mostly railroad officers and other foremen, remained marooned on the fill along with the work train and the local. Both groups are rescued using row boats by late Friday afternoon with no further loss of life.

Theodore Gharst, Reason Jackson,

Daniel Shaffer, and Clifford McLemore were not located and were presumed to be the voices heard pleading for help. With the arrival of the boat from the relief train, a search for the missing victims was launched and continued late into the night. The rescuers continued their search until the cries could no longer be heard. Hindered by the darkness of night and the treacherous current of the still raging floodwaters, the search was called off until daybreak. Other rescue parties were organized and searches resumed at dawn. The floodwaters south of the railroad were thoroughly patrolled all day Friday, but the missing men were not to be found.

The floodwaters crested late Friday, March 28th, and by evening a pile driver was moved from Shops to Blue Hole where a gang of bridge carpenters began the job rebuilding Blue Hole trestle.

The search for the four missing men continued daily for the next 26 days.

The Missing

Engineer Theodore Gharst was born March 26, 1877, near Olney, Illinois. He had just turned 36 the day before he rode 401 into the water. He had been a resident of the city and an employee of the railroad