

February 22, 1997

## The 1909 South Windham Trolley Car Crash



It was a great event when the trolley car finally came to Willimantic in 1903. Many considered this to Willimantic's coming of age and growth and prosperity were to follow. But local trolley services lasted little more than a generation, destroyed by their expensive, long journeys through rural locations, poor ridership, competition from petroleum-driven buses and the convenience of the private

automobile. But for a while Willimantic's trolley car business boomed.

Willimantic's trolleys had to contend with the grade crossings on Lower Main Street, so it was never possible to go non-stop from Baltic to Coventry. Passengers had to get off the west bound trolley at lower Main Street, cross the railroad tracks, and get onto another trolley car which would take them up Main Street and onto Coventry. Trolley cars also had to negotiate the railroad underpass and the narrow stone bridge between the American Thread Company mills. Minor trolley-car accidents were common, but the most serious happened in December, 1909.

At 4:45 pm on Thursday, December 2, 1909, a double-truck closed car, operated by the Connecticut Trolley Company, departed Norwich carrying a large number of traveling salesmen, en route to sell their wares in Willimantic. It stopped in South Windham, and picked up workers from the Smith and Winchester Company who were heading to their homes in Willimantic. Motorman Charles Dexter, the trolley driver, was accompanied by conductor Frederick Abelhis first day on the job. As the trolley gained speed down Dugway valley, adjacent to the Shetucket River, it gained speed, and left the tracks. The forty passengers on board believed that their final day had arrived.

The car bumped along the ties and spun round. Its front end went down into the ditch on the east side of the track, demolishing a telegraph pole. The rear end of the car remained on the track, blocking it completely. The front end of the car was at the bottom of the ditch, some fifteen feet below the track. Onlookers were amazed that the precariously balanced car had not flipped over. The car was sheered from its truck, and beyond broken glass, it did not sustain major damage.

The passengers were violently thrown out of their seats. They crawled out of the car through its broken windows. Drs Weldon, O'Neill and Guild rushed to the scene to treat the injuries. The most serious were sustained by Leander Austin, a foreman at Smith and Winchester, who suffered a broken arm and rib. Those of the injured who

did not live locally were temporarily housed in local hotels. They included people from Norwich, Boston and Merrimack, Mass., and New Jersey.

The blocked track caused a great deal of inconvenience. Lifting tackle arrived from the Greeneville trolley barn, but it was insufficient for the job, and the track remained closed for 48 hours. A South Coventry trolley car was hauled over the Lower Main Street railroad tracks, and used to ferry passengers up to the site of the wreck. There they walked around the derailed trolley, and alighted upon another trolley car which took them to South Windham and points south. Many other people walked to South Windham. Horse-drawn vehicles did a great trade, illustrating how widely used this route was by 1909.

The track was not opened until the following Saturday afternoon, December 4, when the 2:45 pm car from Norwich arrived in Willimantic at 4:05 pm. The derailed car was repaired in the Greeneville car barn. It was discovered that metal fatigue had caused by the front axle to sheer in half, and derail the car. The driver and conductor had been accused by one passenger of driving too fast, but regular passengers knew how fast the trolley cars traveled down Dugway Hill to Willimantic.