

## Prologue

On March 24, 1972, I was a 20-year-old volunteer firefighter with the Valley Cottage, New York Fire Department. Shortly before 8 AM, five lives were ended and many lives, including mine, were changed forever when a fully loaded school bus was struck broadside by a freight train and dragged one quarter mile down the tracks. We were called, almost immediately to assist the Congers Fire Department in managing this almost unimaginable emergency. Even now, the recollection of that day remains crystal clear. I have added some links to assist those unfamiliar with the references used, which are mostly known by long-term local residents. The photos belong to others. The words, and the memories, are mine.

**WARNING: WHILE THERE IS NO OVERTLY GRAPHIC CONTENT, SOME MAY FIND IMAGES OF THE AFTERMATH AND DESCRIPTIONS OF THAT DAY DISTURBING. DISCRETION IS ADVISED.**

## The Five That Fell at Fifty



*An Epitaph for Innocence*

March 24, 2022 marked the fiftieth anniversary of what has come to be known as the [Congers bus crash](#). Fifty years. One half century. Two score and ten. Given that the word anniversary is oft used to describe celebratory events, I'm not sure that its place here is fitting, but the appropriate term somehow manages to escape me. Regardless, the distance is such that the five that fell would now be grandparents and eligible for Social Security if some other fate did not henceforth intervene. Life is sometimes interrupted by seemingly innocuous decisions like where you choose to sit on a high school bus on a sunny Friday morning in spring.

It is said that each generation has its defining moments. Pearl Harbor. The Kennedy assassination. The Challenger explosion. 9/11. If not in days and hours, then time can be measured by the commonly asked question, "where were you, when?" This, and the [Brink's Robbery](#) may be Rockland's equivalents of such historical events, although local generations past perhaps reflected on other tragedies such as the [Haverstraw Landslide](#) and the [Nyack Aniline Fire](#). This I do not know. What I do know is that on March 24, 1972 at 7:55 AM, I was peacefully sleeping in my bed when I was awakened by the sickening sound of bending metal and the mournful and incessant wailing of a locomotive horn. We didn't live near the tracks, but the collision was loud enough to jolt me upright and running out the door. My old house is no longer there, but I suspect that the shadowy memories of that day still hang somewhere suspended over the property as they do the entire town, the epicenter of this maelstrom being an otherwise non-descript grade crossing that has since carried a perpetual claim to its own day of infamy.

There were no real heroes that morning, save for the kids that toughed it out while suffering horrendous injuries, and whoever set up the flow of ambulances. The fact that disused tracks had been removed over the years due to the atrophy of rail travel provided a gravel roadway and the ability to steadily stream patients from the scene to critical care. You must remember that this was a time of leather fire helmets and canvas coats, Cadillac ambulances and basic first aid. Terms like Mass Casualty Incident had not yet made their way into the daily vernacular of first responders, and we did what we could with what we had. There were no paramedics. Focus was on transport. Stop the bleeding. Establish airway. Grab. Go.

Unfortunately, there was also no awareness of things such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or the need for counseling first-responders. We came from a place where "triggered" meant that something caused an explosion, and would hold no quarter for anyone so wimpishly sensitive as to be affected by what was regarded as simply doing your duty, no matter how horrific the call. We were trained to man up from day one. In retrospect, both fringes of the human emotional spectrum are non-productive, with toughness and touchiness being close both in the dictionary and debilitating effect. Like many things, I wish we were smarter about binding our own wounds, especially the ones not visible to the naked eye.

I knew a rookie firefighter who walked to the crash from his nearby home, then promptly tuned around and left, overwhelmed by the sights. His thoughts were, "I can't possibly be of any assistance here." He went on to serve many more years, and I never once questioned him

about his actions. Likely everyone who responded felt the same sense of inadequacy, but we tried. Lord knows we tried. One of the hardest things to reconcile is being a helper who is seemingly powerless to help. A sad realization comes from knowing that you can't save them all. There is but one God, and it certainly isn't you.

For reasons completely foreign to me, the list of people who profess to have been there grows exponentially over time. Like the six million who swear they were at Woodstock, and a comparable lot with vicarious memories of being entertained by four lads from Liverpool at a stadium known as Shea, there seems to be a subliminal need in some to imagine themselves as eye-witnesses to history. The days following 9/11 were similarly sprinkled with tales of professed participants who weren't even on the same continent, let alone at ground zero, when the Twin Towers fell. Still, their stories persist.

While I have refrained from discussing this aspect in the past, I will no longer hold silence. If you were there, believe me, you wished to Christ you weren't. If you want to falsely claim your place, I will gladly trade my nightmares, as likely will others who directly faced their demons that day. Otherwise, in the words of my dear departed father, "stop your bullshit."



### *A School Awaits Five Students Who Will Never Return*

Although our numbers dwindle, there are yet enough of us alive who bear personal testimonies of Gilchrest Crossing. The sights and sounds and smells are burned into our brains so as to be as clear today as they were early on that fateful morning. I was 20 years old, out of high school not even two years. I played ball on weekends with Jimmy McGuinness and Steve Ward and was one of Jimmy's pallbearers. I didn't know everyone on the bus, but if I didn't, I knew their brothers or sisters. We were Indians while it was still politically correct to be so. We were

family.

The lack of panic I saw there will never cease to amaze, although much of it might be attributed by the disbelief of those involved in what had happened as well as the profound abundance of clinical shock. Did we just pull in front of a train? How am I still alive? Where are my friends? There would be time, however, in the weeks and months that followed to vocalize the pain, and this took many voices. Mourning the dead, comforting the wounded, questioning God, and venting anger at the lack of gates at the crossing, the way that school busses were built, and most certainly at the driver. The driver. Did he get off easy? Did he ever save lives at his full-time job as a city firefighter and did this play a factor in what many considered to be light sentencing? Does any of it really matter when no punishment can be more severe than a conscience, and nothing can hope to undo a fate that is irrevocably sealed?



*Five names cast in stone. Nothing can hope to undo what is irrevocably sealed.*

Today there is a stone, somewhat removed from the site, bearing the names of the victims of a momentary indiscretion. An indiscretion that ended five lives, mentally and physically crippled many more, and tore a town asunder. As a seventy-year-old parent, my understanding of the depth of the communal wound has grown over time. As a childless twenty-year old firefighter, the sum of my knowledge was that I lost two friends and could make little sense of why. Valley Cottage on March 25th was not the same place as it was on March 23rd. Nor would it ever be again. There is precious little that argues with a train and wins. That's the law of physics, the law of life, and in the end, the law of death.



We are now two generations removed, and memories mostly exist in faded copies of The Journal News and yellowing photos of somehow familiar faces that were summarily denied adulthood. Future discussions will be further clouded by the gauze of time and faulty memories, diluted by the repetition of bad information so frequently spoken that it becomes accepted fact. Eventually, except for those for whom the catastrophe will remain forever real, it will be largely forgotten, and those who see the memorial in the park will pass on by without a second thought as to its purpose and the names inscribed thereon. Perhaps a new tragedy will eventually replace this day in public consciousness. While the optimist in me prays that this will never happen, the realist in me ponders not if, but when. Half a century and more in public safety has reinforced in me the unshakable belief that tragedy is an exceedingly patient but ever-present companion.

Over these past fifty years, I have periodically written about this event, and as my personal life story now nears its final chapters, I increasingly feel compelled to say no more. Those affected can choose to forget or remember, and to maintain these memories in their own manner. As for me, March 24th was the worst day of my life, save for the loss of my parents who I dearly miss. Even then, on bad days this pain sometimes surpasses. All who were there saw things that they forever wished they had not. Although my journey took me to the rank of chief in my home town of Valley Cottage and service as a fire officer in two other states, I mercifully experienced nothing more sinister. This is not to say that I was not a participant in far too many traumatic incidences. I was. Many times over. But this one was more personal. I was younger. It hit harder. And, coming relatively early in my career and life, I've had more time to think about it.

And think about it I do.

I think about it all too often.

In spite of the torment, there were valuable lessons lurking deep inside this tragedy. I took from that dusty gravel purgatory a new found perspective on life. If teenagers were not impervious to misfortune, then certainly a 20-year-old who had already squandered several opportunities was equally not immune. My one regret is that I periodically forget those teachings, until I am shocked back into reality by some randomly related act. Life is precious short not to be lived to the fullest.

I have spared the lascivious details of this and days of similar ilk in an effort to shield those who ask first responders to tell them about their worst calls. Whether these entreaties come innocently out of honest curiosity or from a morbid form of voyeurism is of little import. If you know, you know. If you don't, believe me – you don't really want to know. Suffice it to say I observed more humanity on those tracks that single day than perhaps anywhere or any time else on this planet in my journey that now exceeds seven decades. Our tears never stopped the dedication or the mission. Even after the victims had all been transported, great care was taken to remove every evidence of their presence. Expended medical supplies, papers, books –

anything that left a trace or could potentially be taken as a souvenir by some opportunistic ghoul was given great care as it was collected. All of the physical remnants were carefully swept away, but the ghosts.....

The ghosts remain.



*The scene is cleared, but the ghosts remain.*

And so, on this day, one half century removed from this devastating detour of life, I share my condolences with the family and friends of the survivors, and with all who served together in a most desperate attempt to change the course of fate. So too, must I reach out to the loved ones of the five that fell. I wish I could offer more comfort in the wake of your unfulfilled dreams but cannot. Finally, I can never attempt to console those who rode bus 596 that day. Yours is a hell for which suitable words will never be invented.

Should this be the last I ever publicly speak of this event; I feel that I have come as close to the truth as I am humanly capable. As I sit here, with both my thoughts and my emotions exhausted, I ponder how to best bring closure. There are any number of witty or prophetic quotes from learned men and women from which to choose, but none quite seem to express the depth required. How does one write an epitaph for innocence?

Still, in the end, this remains simply a tale about fate, survival, and the resilience of a school and town who still struggle to understand the reasons why. But, yet, it is so much more, and the feelings it awakens are impossible to explain. Time softens, but it does not erase. Farewell, Jimmy, Richard, Bobby, Tom, and Steve. Lads, we hardly knew ye.

### The Five that Fell



James 'Jimmy' McGuinness Jr., 17

RICHARD MACAYLO, 18

ROBERT 'BOBBY' MAUTERER, 14

Thomas "Tom" Grosse 14

Stephen 'Steve' Ward, 16



