Remembering the Rockport Train Wreck

No one could have predicted what happened in Rockport, right outside of Hackettstown, early in the morning on June 17, 1925.

On Wednesday, November 8, at the Hackettstown Historical Society's monthly meeting, Bob Stead recounted the story of the Rockport Train Wreck, the worst train accident to happen in this area.

A severe summer electrical storm blew through the area and lightning hit the Williams and Hibler lumberyard in Hackettstown (where Blue Ridge Lumber is located today). Most of the townsfolk were involved with the blaze that eventually burned the yard to the ground. Yet, unbeknownst to anyone, the storm had also set the stage for another, more deadly accident.

An eastbound special train filled with German-Americans had departed from Buffalo, New York en route to Hoboken, New Jersey and the transatlantic ships waiting for them. After a brief stop in Scranton, Pennsylvania to change crews, the train continued on towards its final destination.

The earlier storm had eroded the dirt road at the crossing and around the track in Rockport. Traveling at about 50-70 miles per hour when it reached Rockport, the main wheels of the engine derailed when it hit the debris-filled crossing and began riding along the ties. The engine came to a grinding halt and flipped over. The two passenger filled day coaches behind it decoupled and flipped over the top of the engine. The impact caused the boiler to rupture and live steam filled the coach, burning the passengers inside. It was the steam, more than the accident, that caused the death of fifty people, including every member of the crew except the flagman. The day coach was later dubbed 'the death car' by the New York Times.

Hackettstown citizens and doctors helped the accident victims on-site, using sheets and pillows from the pullman cars to help make them comfortable. The injured were transported to the hospital in Easton where ten additional passengers eventually died.

A bronze marker commemorates the site of the accident. "The site hasn't changed much since it happened, and you can still find pieces of debris," said Stead, who passed around a piece of solid brass from the wrecked engine. "It wasn't anyone's fault," he continued. "It really was just a tragic accident."