

Fred Wilson, 90, '20s train wreck hero

By Art Charlton
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

It was about 3 a.m. and Fred Wilson, a 17-year-old farm boy doing his chores, had just finished milking the cows when he heard the crash.

A neighbor called moments later to say a train had jumped the tracks in their section of Mansfield, just outside Hackettstown. Mr. Wilson was one of the first rescuers on the scene on June 16, 1925, for what turned out to be the deadliest disaster in Warren County history.

Mr. Wilson, who died Sunday at age 90 in Hackettstown Community Hospital and was buried yesterday, was "the last of that group of guys that went in there and took those people out of the wreck," said Frank Dale, a local historian who chronicled the crash in the pamphlet "Disaster at Rockport" published two years ago.

The derailment of an eastbound passenger train at the village of Rockport killed 50 men, women and children. Many of them died when the engine's boiler exploded, pouring steam into an overturned sleeper car and a day coach.

It remains one of the worst train wrecks in U.S. history.

Mr. Wilson's death, Dale said, represents "the passing of kind of a heroic age, when people risked their life and went out of their way for others."

There are people who probably would have died at Rockport in 1925 but instead lived full lives thanks to Mr. Wilson's efforts, Dale remarked.

In a 1995 interview with The Star-Ledger when a monument was dedicated at the derailment site, Mr. Wilson recalled hearing the screams of the injured and working to free the survivors.

"Most of them who died had been scalded. It was quite a thing," Mr. Wilson remembered.

Wesley Hill, 80, of Hackettstown, was only a boy at the time but said he vividly remembers going to see the wreck just hours after it occurred. He no longer recalls the names of all the rescuers, but said people like Mr. Wilson and Lyman Gulick — who alerted Mr. Wilson that day — "were well thought-of as being real heroes."

However, Mr. Wilson was never

one to consider himself a hero, and his initial reaction to the crash scene was very human, according to Dale and Mr. Wilson's son, William, also of Mansfield.

Dale said Mr. Wilson told him "he was so terrified that he wanted to turn around and run away, he didn't

want to see it. And then he heard a woman scream ... he went back and he got her out of there. He stayed and he did what he felt was his obligation to do."



WILSON

Dale added, "It probably took more courage to have that feeling but still go back and do what had to be done."

"He just happened to be there, and pitched in to help," William Wilson said of his father.

The disaster attracted thousands of onlookers. William Wilson remembers his father saying he couldn't retrieve the Ford Model T he had driven to the crash scene for four or five days because the area "was like a big parking lot" from all the people who came to gawk at the wreckage.

Born in Kearny but a Mansfield resident for most of his life, Mr. Wilson farmed for 27 years and then worked 25 years for the former Morgan Greenhouses in Hackettstown. He also painted houses, continuing to work until about a year ago.

Hill said Mr. Wilson was about 82 or 83 when he painted the Cochran Funeral Home in Hackettstown, climbing about 50 feet high on a ladder. "We were amazed to see how agile he was," Hill said.

In addition to his son, Mr. Wilson is survived by a daughter, Martha Kenny of Mansfield; 10 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren. His wife, Martha, died in 1994.

Services were held yesterday at Cochran Funeral Home in Hackettstown, and burial was in Rockport Cemetery.

Fred July 28, 1997