

Chapter Eight

THE WRECK OF OLD NO. 1

SYLVESTER MARSH WAS BORN IN 1803 IN CAMPTON, NEW Hampshire, at the southern end of Franconia Notch. He was the ninth of eleven children, a situation which latter-day psychologists say fosters a certain competitive push, and when he was nineteen years old he set out to make his fortune. He had three dollars and he headed for Boston, 150 miles away. It took young Sylvester three days to walk there and he found employment on a farm in Newton, west of the city. Soon he had a stall in the original Quincy Market in Boston and he was a passenger when the DeWitt Clinton pulled the first steam train on the Albany/Schenectady run.

By 1833, he was in Chicago, a place of 300 souls that Sylvester thought had a bright future. Fortune seemed to hitch Sylvester to this star and the first railroad to operate out of Chicago ended just behind his property. He alertly went into the meat packing business and built a large plant to abut the railroad terminus. Then he developed a revolutionary method of preserving corn. All this earned a very considerable fortune, familiarity with the many uses of steam, and a fulsome salute from *The Chicago Press and Tribune*: This "enterprising, ingenious inventor will live in history as one of the benefactors of his species."

Sylvester Marsh retired from his several businesses in the mid-1850s and moved to West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Inactivity did not suit him; in fact, it brought on a sinking spell that was diagnosed as dyspepsia. Seeking more salutary air, as the fashion of the day indicated, he returned to his old neighborhood in the White Mountains. Further obedient to the fashion of the day, he sought to climb Mount Washington by way of the Crawford's Bridle Path. The weather turned against him and he barely reached the Tip-Top House.

Characteristically, Sylvester resolved to improve the condition of suffering mankind, in this case, to find a better way to reach the heights. Three years later, he approached the New Hampshire state legislature with a model of a mountain-climbing railway. A charter was granted, sort of—one generous voice in the debate said that Sylvester Marsh could build his railway to the moon if he wanted to. The tone suggested skepticism.

Work began in 1866, the rail line was built up a western ridge of the mountain, and on the Fourth of July, 1869, word went forth that the railway to the moon had reached the top of Mount Washington. The train was driven by a rack and pinion system under the engine, which was itself one of the oldest designs in the whole inventory of steam power, a firebox with a vertical boiler on top of it and a smokestack on top of that. Engine No 1 was officially named "Hero," but the look was familiar: people thought it resembled the bottle used for a popular condiment called pepper sauce. It didn't take long for the north-country tongue to sharpen the word and Engine No 1 entered history as Peppersass.

This pilot model retired from active duty in 1878. It went west for display at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, more widely known as the Chicago World's Fair, then it was at Chicago's Museum of Natural History, and in 1904 it went to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, popularly known as the St. Louis World's Fair. Then it disappeared.

Reverend Guy Roberts lived in Whitefield, New Hampshire, at the north-western edge of the great mountain ranges, and he developed a consuming interest in finding the well-loved Mount Washington native. He followed the engine's trail to Baltimore and through heroic personal efforts he managed to have it returned to the place of its first fame, where it was reconditioned and pronounced sound in June 1929. The annual Conference of New England Governors was scheduled for the Bretton Woods Hotel in July, the

base station of the cog railway was just up the road, and it seemed like a fine thing to send the official parties up Mount Washington to see the ceremonial return of Old Peppersass.

DANIEL ROSSITER

JULY 1929

Even today, the base station of the Mount Washington cog railway is like any other train yard in the elder days of steam, only smaller; there are whistles tooting and cinders underfoot and smoke and steam swirling overhead. On the morning of July 20, 1929, however, the party clothes were out of the closet; there were grandstands and flags and banners and bunting and a grand patriotic display to greet the double holiday proclaimed for the arrival of the six New England governors and the return of Old Peppersass.

In the language of the cog railway, a train is one engine pushing one passenger car up the mountain. The engine is not connected to the car and there is no turnaround for the return trip: the engine backs down the track with the passenger car resting against it in front. The engine and the car both have primary brakes and back-up brakes and either unit can stop itself independent of the other.

The program for this festive day was elaborate. The governors and the other invited guests were served a grand breakfast at the very grand Bretton Woods Hotel, then the governors and Reverend Roberts climbed aboard an original and bunting-bedecked Concord stagecoach drawn by six prancing horses which took them to the Boston & Maine Railroad station. Two special trains, also draped in red, white, and blue for the day, took those distinguished gentlemen and more than 900 other guests the few miles to the base station of the cog railway. The two trains proved insufficient for the multitude, and those who had to wait for a second run were entertained with selections by a brass band and a splendid tenor soloist.

Once everyone was at the base station of the cog and seated for the ceremonies, the president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad officially returned ownership of Old Peppersass to the president of the Boston & Maine, who in turn presented the relic to the governor of New Hampshire. Then the governors, their entourages, and other invited guests boarded six cog trains

By the time I was a child there were nine cabins ringing the property and the barn was partly converted for rudimentary summer living and the old farmhouse had a great many rooms. Once, in the grips of summer *ennui*, I took stock. There were forty-nine spaces I identified as rooms in the main house, but that included bathrooms. Even so, upwards of sixty people could be accommodated in the house and the cabins and the barn, and the stories of four generations of family, friends of family, and friends of friends had grown so numerous and so complexly entwined that I was never exactly sure who was kin and who was not. There was, for instance, a recurring class of guests who were called "loose connections," and to this day I don't know if they were relatives or not.

It didn't matter, because the elders and their heroics were recorded in a pile of black photograph albums in what we called The Big Living Room. The pictures showed gentlemen in suits and ladies in skirts that swept the ground and boys in white shirts and ties and girls in middy blouses and bloomers and black stockings, all of them up there on the mountain heights with blanket roles over their shoulders. Those of us in the rising generation would study those pictures through many a rainy afternoon, and we understood that, as it is said in Genesis, there were indeed giants in the earth in those days.

The Big Living Room had a large bay window that faced the north meadow. A sofa faced the window and that's where we sat to look at the photograph albums and when we looked up we saw Mount Washington rising at the end of the meadow, and even as children we knew that people died up there. We thought about them and we thought most about Lizzie Bourne; she reminded us of the ladies in the photograph albums as they went striding across the heights in skirts that swept the ground. Closer to the moment, we thought about Jessie Whitehead.

JESSIE WHITEHEAD

JANUARY 1933

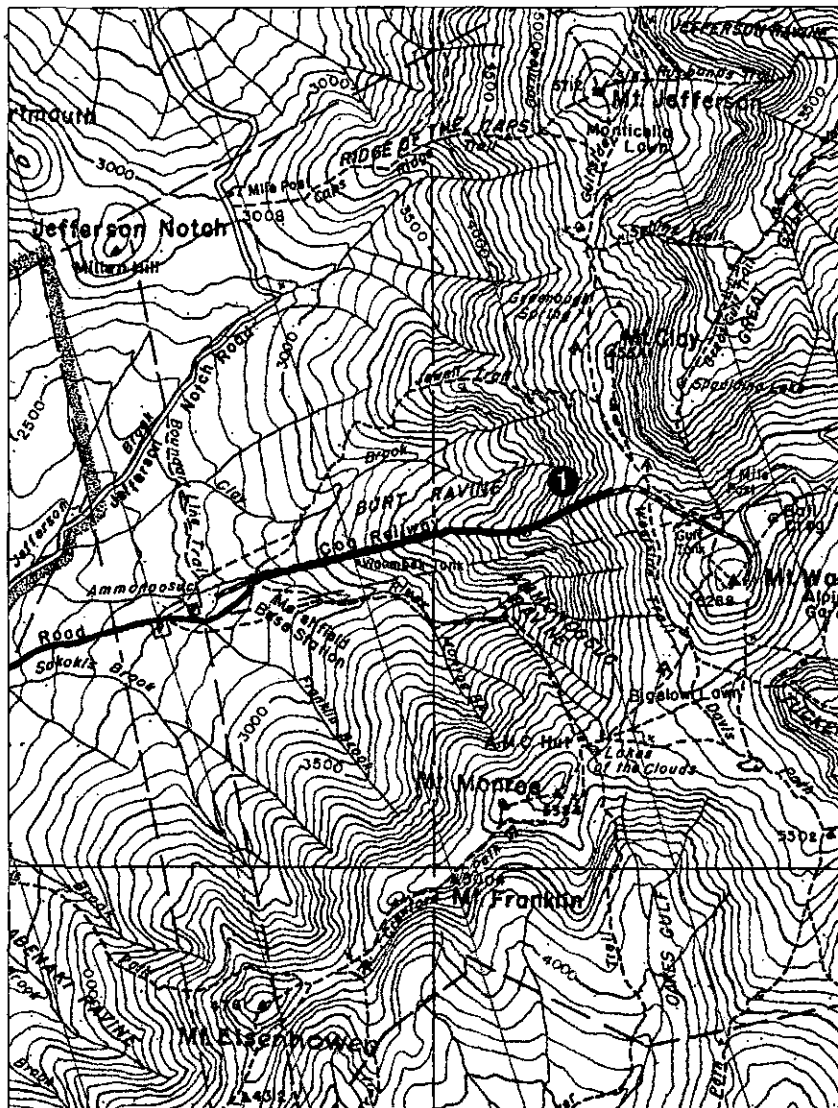
Jessie Whitehead was a notable person. We knew that, because she was at the head of the list of notable persons who stayed at Overlook. Charles Evans Hughes stayed with us, he was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; there were Rockefellers; there was Curt Chase, commanding general of the First

hour. Engineer Frost engaged the reverse gear and began to back the engine down the track. Then he heard a sort of snap; it seemed to come from the front of the engine. A tooth in the cog driving wheel had broken.

Almost every steam engine in the history of railroading towed its fuel tender as a separate element. Peppersass did not. The boiler and the tender were on a single frame and the engineer and fireman stood out in the weather as they did their work. This day three extra people started up the mountain on Peppersass, riding on the fuel bunker any way they could. One was the engineer's sixteen-year-old son Caleb; the two others were photographers Daniel Rossiter and Winston Pote.

Reverend Guy Roberts, the man who led the recovery of Old Peppersass, rode on the last of the six trains sent up ahead of the day's honoree. No cog train ever moved very fast, and the reverend stepped off the platform of his train just above Jacob's Ladder. He thought this was the right thing to do; he'd hike along beside Peppersass as it made its last climb. He stopped at Jacob's Ladder, the better to savor the noble sight as the engine climbed the trestle for this last time, the crown of his twenty-three year effort on behalf of history. Then he thought he'd walk beside the train, or perhaps catch a ride, all the way back down to its final rest at the bottom of the mountain.

The reverend was somewhat surprised to see the engine continue on above Jacob's Ladder and then out of sight over the skyline. He waited forty minutes before he heard a rumbling in the tracks that signaled the return of the train. Then, he wrote later, "Glancing up the track I saw steam or smoke as from her stack, the engine was being concealed by a brow of the mountain. But in an instant she was in sight and I thought, 'Here she comes.' Then I realized that her speed was very fast and the next instant I thought, 'Why, she is running away!' On she rushed, careening and tottering, when with a sudden lurch, off toppled her smokestack, crashing onto the rocks at my right. Then I noticed that a man was hanging to the flaring top of its tender, swaying as it careened! The terrible outfit flashed past, showering me with its cinders, as on it dashed in its mad rush to death down Jacob's Ladder, tearing and crashing. When but some fifteen feet beyond me the man dropped from his hold on the tender and was shot down some forty feet through space outside the upper side of Jacob's Ladder, where he crashed to death on the sharp jagged rocks and huge timbers at the foot of the trestle and about midway its length.



1. Daniel Rossiter died when Peppersass crashed on cog railway

"Watching Old Peppersass as she shrieked out her swan song, she continued tearing down the Ladder until coming to the reverse curve at its foot. Being unable to make the curve she leaped from the rails into space over the brink of Burt's Ravine, where with a thunder-like report the boiler exploded amid a great puff of steam, landing her some thirty feet from the rack and with pieces of metal and debris flying in all directions, at last burying her shattered and scattered self amid the rotten wood, stunted spruce and birches that there were growing."

The engineer, the fireman, one photographer, and the boy all jumped clear of Peppersass while it was still going fairly slowly. They were all considerably battered and some were broken in minor ways, but their lives were not threatened. Daniel Rossiter was the other photographer and he had the same chance to escape the mad plunge as the others did, but for some reason he hung on to the tender. Some say he seemed to be reaching for his camera, as if to save it from the wreck that must occur.

The enormous explosion of the boiler hurled fragments of the engine more than 900 feet down the mountain and Reverend Roberts hurried to the wreck, putting out small fires beside the trestle as he went. Just below Jacob's Ladder he found "the bruised and broken body of what proved to be that of my friend, Daniel Rossiter, lying on the jagged rocks below and in such a broken position as to not in the least resemble a man as seen from above." A caddy had hiked to a vantage point a little farther up the trestle and he ran to help Reverend Roberts. As the savior of Peppersass put it, "We lifted Dan and placed his head and shoulders in a less terrible position and thus was he found by those who removed his body."

The caddy slipped when he climbed down from the trestle and a large splinter was driven into his thigh, but after he'd helped the reverend with Mr. Rossiter's body, the caddy hobbled and ran all the way down to the place he called Kro Flite, the name applied to the settlement at the base of the cog railroad in 1925 and 1926. As a reporter wrote, "He gave the first news of the disaster, just before he fainted."

The situation was difficult. Old Peppersass was destroyed, five people were injured and one was dead, and, since a section of track on Jacob's Ladder had been damaged by the crash, six trainloads of guests were stranded at the top of the mountain. There was one spare engine at the base and a fire was lit under the boiler, but no engineer could be found. The first of the six

trains had started down from the top with a full load of passengers, then it stopped when the first damage to Jacob's Ladder came into view.

Joe Dodge had been engaged as a guest lecturer for the ceremonies and he knew how to dress for celebrations like the return of Old Peppersass: he was wearing plus-four knickers from a golfer's outfit and a bright red Hudson Bay jacket. Joe was on the first train to start down from the summit, but it stopped some way above Jacob's Ladder and out of sight of the wreck. The train was also below the Gulfside Tank, the place where upward-bound engines took on water to finish the trip to the top. Joe knew this meant trouble for the guests; the train apparently could not go on down the mountain and, not having enough water to make sufficient steam, it could not get back to the top.

Soon the passengers knew there was trouble, too. Nightfall was approaching and they were stranded above timberline with no news of their future. As Joe remembered, "It was getting dark and sort of cool and I had about twenty-five men and women to look after, all of them complaining. One woman on the train got hysterical. Her husband wasn't much help, so I picked her up piggy-back, and I said to her, 'Come on, sis. You'll have to get going if you want to get down the mountain.' Well, sir, she clawed at me, she screamed, and she talked baby talk all the way down. It was rough going along those tracks, but I kept my footing. When we finally got to a path, I gave her a shove and said, 'Get going, sister.'"

The reserve engine at the base was kept hot while an engineer walked the three miles down from the summit, and as dusk was falling he started the engine back up to Jacob's Ladder pushing a flatcar loaded with timbers and tools and a work crew to study the damage.

The men were able to make the trestle marginally passable, and at 10:00 p.m. the work train returned with the engineer of Old Peppersass, his fireman, and the others injured in the crash. Before long, Joe's group reached the base station. He'd led them down in the dark and there were no injuries, but they noticed that someone had taken down all the flags and bunting from the morning's ceremonies.

Five trains and the guests riding on them remained on top long after nightfall; as one of the passengers said, it was like being shipwrecked at sea, families were separated and not to be rejoined until the small hours of Sunday morning. They were eventually taken down the mountain on the auto

road and, true to the spirit of shipwreck, Governor Tobey of New Hampshire was the last to leave the summit. They all finally gathered at the Bretton Woods Hotel, the place they'd left with such fanfare less than twenty-four hours earlier. Colonel Barron owned the hotel, and he and Senator George Moses served sandwiches and coffee until Governor Tobey arrived at 4:15 A.M. with the last of the guests that were stranded on the summit.

Mr. Rossiter's camera was smashed beyond repair, but the first three pictures he took that day survived and they lived on for their posterity in the archival memory of Old Peppersass. His spectacles and his monogrammed gold watch, now dented and stopped at the moment of his death, were found near the trestle of Jacob's Ladder and returned to his family. More than anything else, the broken watch told of changing times. On Friday of that week, July 25, 1929, the White Mountains Air Line began daily service to Boston and New York from the new airport in the hometown of Reverend Guy Roberts, ten miles from the cog railway for which he'd worked so hard. The plane carried five passengers in addition to the pilot, and the cabin was enclosed for greater comfort.