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FULL PARTICULARS OF THE ACCIDENT

STATEMENT BY ALFRED L. ARMSTRONG, ONE OF THE INJURED PASSENGERS

Mr. Alfred L. Armstrong, of Oquawko, Ill., the only person returning to New York in the *George Law* who was on the train to which the accident occurred, has furnished our reporter with the following detailed account of the particulars of the accident:

I left New York in the *George Law* on the 21st of last April, and, with the steamer's passengers, was landed at Aspinwall, to take the railroad thence to Panama. We arrived in Aspinwall on the 1st of May, and were to take the morning express train of May 6, in order to connect with the steamer on the Pacific side.

A baggage train left Aspinwall at 7 a.m., preceding the train which was to carry the passengers. There were eight or nine baggage cars in the train, filled with the baggage of the passengers. The engine of this train at Obispo Bridge, thirty-one miles from Aspinwall, ran off the track. There was only a single track here, and it being impossible to raise the engine from its position off the track, the cars had to remain as they were – blockading the track. The engineers and brakemen worked several hours, erecting a platform, with the view of getting up the engine, but to no purpose. As they failed in this, and could not communicate with either terminus of the road to announce the accident, they placed a sentinel to guard against being run into by any other trains, and thus waited.

At 6 a.m. an express train left Aspinwall with the cabin passengers of the *George Law*. This train was composed of a baggage car and nine passenger cars. The passenger cars were all full of passengers. Each car contained about eight-four passengers. The engine of this train did not work well, and the engineer, in consequence, forced to run the train off on a switch at Matachin, about a mile and a half before reaching Obispo Bridge, when the accident to the baggage train occurred.

At 8:30 a.m. half an hour after the departure of the first passenger train, *a second passenger train, containing the steerage passengers*, left Aspinwall. This train was also a long train, and contained nine passenger cars, besides the baggage car. Upon crossing up to where the first passenger train lay switched off, the train stopped, and being informed of the disabling of the first train's engine, as also of the accident to the baggage train at Obispo Bridge, it was decided, with the single engine of the last passenger train, to take the two trains and proceed to Obispo bridge. The first passenger train, accordingly, passed the switch, after which it backed to take

the train that was switched off. The disabled engine had been disconnected from this train and placed upon another switch adjoining. The two trains thus joined were drawn by one locomotive. They contained in all twenty cars – eighteen passenger cars and two baggage cars. After getting on the main track the train proceeded to Obispo Bridge. It was found impossible to go on to Panama in consequence of the baggage train obstructing the track. It was a complete wilderness there, and no food being obtainable it was determined to go back with the entire passengers to Aspinwall. It was about 2 p.m. when the train thus started to return. The engine was a powerful one, and drew the cars along at full speed without difficulty.

I was seated in the seventh passenger car from the locomotive. The train was going at an unusually high rate of speed – so much so that the fact was a subject of remark among the passengers generally in the car in which I sat. The speed was commented upon as dangerous, from the frequent and short curves in the road. I felt somewhat alarmed, and put my head out of the window. I did not have my head out more than a minute, when I saw the front passenger car (as the train was passing a curve) suddenly force the outer rail from its place, and, darting from the track, instantly turn a complete summerset. All I recollect from that moment is feeling a sudden crash and crying out “We are all killed.” I saw the passengers jump to their feet, and I made a jump myself, but how or where I know not. I only know that I found myself in an instant landed upright on my feet in a pond alongside the track. I either jumped or was thrown some twelve feet from the track. The scene that ensued it is impossible to describe. The locomotive and the first passenger car, having retained their place on the track, proceeded some distance, as if unconscious of the sudden sundering of the link that connected them with the remaining cars of the train. The seven cars succeeding the one first thrown from the track were a mingled mass of shattered fragments. They had been thrown sideways, lengthways, crossways, bottom side up, ends up, and in every imaginable way. Portions of the wreck were submerged in the pond of water on either side of the track. The cries of agony that arose from amid the ruins were heart piercing. Here was an arm, and there was a leg, with no other appendage. In another place was presented the sad spectacle of a head separated from the body, and again the trunk of a human body shorn entirely of its head and limbs. As soon as possible after the crash, those uninjured turned their attention to discover the extent of loss of life and wounds sustained. It was found that beyond the first eight cars, the injury to the passengers did not extend, except in occasional bruises to those occupying the two passenger cars directly following these eight. Both of these later cars were thrown from the track, and the occupants received more or less contusions. The remaining cars of the train retained their places on the rails, and the people inside received no injuries other than some slight bruises. While those having escaped personal injury were seeking to recover from beneath the wreck those still giving symptoms of life, the locomotive detached from the train which had come back to the scene of the disaster was dispatched to Aspinwall for help to search for the dead and wounded. The place of the accident was near Gatun’s bridge, only nine miles distance from

Aspinwall. The track for some distance was completely torn up, so that the cars still remaining on the track could not be attached to the engine in front. At about 4 p.m. a train returned from Aspinwall. In the interval the wounded passengers suffered dreadfully from thirst. Many of them drank from the muddy pond on either side of the track, though it was red with human blood. Fortunately, a supply of water was brought by the train, which greatly alleviated their sufferings. Fifty-three wounded passengers were placed on the cars and taken to Aspinwall for medical and surgical treatment.

No physicians came with the train, though the reason why none were sent was not explained. The bodies of the dead, as far as recovered from the wreck, were not removed. It was about 8 o'clock in the evening when the first train returned to Aspinwall.

I remained to assist in the digging out the dead bodies. The night was dark, and with the dim light shed over the ground by a few lanterns showing visibly here and there heaps of dead bodies, and the increasing moans and shrieks of the wounded added to the mournful countenances of those at work in the removal of the shattered wreck, made it a scene never to be forgotten. At 4 o'clock in the morning, a second train arrived from Aspinwall, and carried back more of the wounded. I left in this train. The bodies of the dead and some of the wounded still remained at the disaster. I did not get the names of any of the killed or wounded. *None but the steerage passengers were injured.*

By the authentic accounts of the Panama Railroad accident, it appears that the loss of life was almost entirely among the steerage passengers by the *George Law*. It happened this way. Three trains left Aspinwall for Panama, with the passengers of the *George Law*, some nine hundred in number. The first train contained baggage, the second train the cabin passengers, and the third train the steerage passengers. After the freight train got off the tracks, it was deemed advisable to return with the other two trains to Aspinwall. Accordingly the passenger trains were united, and the two locomotives turned around on the turntable, and attached to the rear of the combined train, thus bringing the steerage passengers to the fore part of the train, as it returned toward Aspinwall. The nine cars therefore which were smashed. Were filled with the steerage passengers of the *George Law* which left New York on the 21st of April last.