

Village memorializes victims of 1867 train disaster known as the Angola Horror

Marker designates site of derailment



By T. J. Pignataro NEWS STAFF REPORTER

More than 140 years after they plummeted to their deaths in one of the worst rail disasters in American history, 50 victims of what came to be known as the Angola Horror were remembered Wednesday afternoon.

A marker was dedicated describing the place where an express train traveling from Cleveland to Buffalo on Dec. 18, 1867, derailed and burst into flames as it tumbled to the bottom of the gorge in Big Sister Creek.

“We hope it’s here forever documenting history,” said Gifford Swyers, a member of the Town of Evans Historical Society. “We dedicate this to the victims of the Angola train disaster.”

With that, Angola Mayor Howard “Hub” Frawley, Trustee William G. Houston and Historical Society President William Haberer unveiled the black metal marker trimmed in gray before a few dozen spectators gathered at the Mill Street bridge. “It’s very important for Village of Angola residents,” Frawley said. “It’s big-time history.”

Frawley said putting up the memorial is only the first part of a three-phase process to honor the victims of the crash and commemorate the charity Angola village residents exhibited in the days following the disaster.

Also in the works is:

- A second memorial to at least 17 unidentified and unknown victims buried in an unmarked grave at Forest Lawn.

- An exhibit dedicated to the Horror — including a statue of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller — planned to be erected on Commercial Street in the village.

Rockefeller, who, before founding Standard Oil and going on to become one of the world's richest men in the late 19th century, narrowly missed being on the Horror train after he was late to the station in Cleveland that fateful day.

His bags made the train and burned in the wreck.

Rockefeller, who was headed to New York City, hopped the next train and was held up in Angola because of the wreck. There, he telegraphed his wife thanking God for sparing his life.

"It's one of the best-kept secrets in American history," Frawley said.

Swyers said that the idea for a marker had been talked about in town for years, but a January column in The Buffalo News by Charity Vogel provided the impetus for the community to act.

"Nothing had ever been done to recognize this," Swyers said. "We're doing this not only for the historical significance, but as a memorial to all those victims — the 50 people who died and the more than 100 who were injured."

The \$1,100 cost for the marker was funded as a joint collaboration between the Angola Village Board and the Evans Historical Society. Help erecting it was provided by Erie County and the Town of Evans. tpignataro@buffnews.com