

91 Mtn Mem. for May

A TRAGIC DAY IN MOUNTAIN HISTORY

By Robert Williamson

June 3, marks the anniversary of the Mountain's most ghastly 1914 accident. It would be all but lost in time if it had not been for Ken Babin's curiosity about his old Mount Hamilton house. Nearby is the former site of the Incline Railway built by John W. Lake in 1895 and the Mountain Park (Summers) Theatre built by the Webb brothers in 1902 on Mountain Park Avenue.



Mount Hamilton's Concession Street as it appeared in 1914 between Cliff Avenue (left frame) and Hamilton Avenue (right frame). Ken Babin's Hamilton Avenue house is out of frame across from the house on the right. The incline and theatre would be in the far background out of frame on the left.

Photo credit Mountain News, September 6, 1972

Using the old City Directories in the Public Library, Ken found that his house at 33 Hamilton Avenue was built in 1910 and was listed under the name of Webb. That immediately captured his interest especially when he learned that the Webb brothers, George and Thomas, purchased the Incline Railway from John Lake in 1906. From 1911 to 1914 the house on Hamilton Avenue was listed under the name of an incline railway employee, Robert Anderson, and then his widow, Gertie Anderson, until 1931. Now after countless hours of research, Ken had stumbled upon a mystery. What had happened to Robert Anderson in 1914?

That date provided more curious connections when Ken re-read my Summers family biography, "Our World's A Stage". He discovered that in 1914 the Summers Mountain Theatre opened three weeks late on June 15 because of extensive incline repair work. Constructed cheaply on a "cut and fill" excavation instead of on an elevated ramp supported by concrete pedestals, the East End Incline Railway was subject to frequent washouts and after 18 years was in need of major repair. As if by foreshadow the theatre season opened, ironically, with a play entitled "Nobody's Widow."

Then came that moment of serendipity that arrives sooner or later to all diligent researchers like Ken. He found George Webb's Diary in the archives with the following notations:

Tues. June 2, 1914;

[indcipherable] to notify the board before having inspections made of the Incline.

Wed. June 3, 1914;

*J.C. Royce came to Incline this A.M. - to return tomorrow to further inspect Incline. **Robt. Anderson killed in west track of Incline a little after 3.***

Armed with a date and a fact, Ken was able to find the story he was looking for in the Spectator. This is a synopsis of what he learned:

Robert Anderson a Conductor on the East End Incline was employed in construction while the incline was out of commission. He was installing cable wheels under the track 2/3 of the way down the escarpment while his younger brother, Peter, was moving heavy wooden railway ties, 24 feet long and 14 inches square, at the edge of the upper platform. Two large timbers tumbled loose and skidded rapidly down the incline track. Kneeling in an excavation between the rails Robert heard his younger brother's warning and ducked out of sight as the wooden ties hurtled toward him. Thinking the danger had passed he raised his head and was struck by the second tie, which decapitated him.



Believed to be a Hamilton Spectator photo, courtesy Robin McKee. This photo of unidentified Incline workers was probably part of a report pending delays of the summer theatre season. Although speculative, the man standing in the centre of the photo wearing a fedora appears to fit the parameters of Robert Anderson; a railway conductor, no pick and shovel laborer, age 39, with prominent dark mustache, large ears, and hand on the shoulder of his younger brother, Peter.

Ken Babin's interest in Mount Hamilton's history and our Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society news column has brought to life this horrific century-old story.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <Hamiltonheritage.ca> for more information.