

## NO BRAKES! RUNAWAY TRUCKS ON THE HILLS OF BROWNSVILLE

The historic building was an immobile target near the bottom of the hill where Market Street turns and enters Brownsville's North Side business district. The heavy truck raced down the hill, much too fast, the pavement of U. S. Route 40 a frightening blur beneath its wheels.

The driver frantically worked the gearshift, hoping to somehow regain control of his truck before it reached the bend at Broadway and Market. At that curve and beyond were unsuspecting pedestrians, busy intersections, and certain tragedy. Behind the truck's cab, the trailer was piled high with heavy cinder blocks, their weight pushing the runaway truck downhill toward disaster.

Cinder blocks. Not a crane. Not a load of steel.

On Monday morning, August 23, 1999, I received an e-mail from someone I didn't know. It was from Theodore P. Williams of Tallahassee, Florida, formerly of Marianna, Pa. and a graduate of West Bethlehem High School. He is now a professor of biophysics at Florida State University.

Ted had received a copy of one of my weekly columns and explained that he enjoyed reading about the area. He added that although he was not a Brownsville native, he once had an experience in Brownsville that he would not easily forget. He proceeded to tell me about it. When I read his e-mail message again two days later, a chill ran down my spine. I sent Ted a message and asked him for more details.

Ted, who has written a number of short stories, sent me what he called an "extensive outline of a short story" he wrote about that experience. He emphasized it was unpolished but like me, he too was fascinated by an eerie coincidence. He gave me permission to use the draft outline of his story in my column.

As you read Ted's story, remember this. I received his original e-mail, in which he told me about this memorable episode, on Monday morning, August 23. *One day later*, on Tuesday, August 24, a runaway

truck crashed into the historic Brashear House in Brownsville on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Market Street.

Here is Ted's story in his own words.

*In the late '40s and early '50s, during the summers, I started to work at the Marianna Lumber Yard, driving truck. The yard had two trucks: a two-ton and a ten-ton. When the smaller one was needed, I drove it. Occasionally, I drove the big one.*

*Other times, I did all the other jobs that summer time people did. Actually, there was only one other summer person, Jimmy Hazlett. "Haze" was one year behind me in school and he was a reserve quarterback on our football team. We were good buddies and working together at the Yard. I worked there for two or three summers and so did Haze.*

*Neither Haze nor I was exceptionally big for our age, so it was a real relief for us to go out in the truck rather than stay in the Yard and unload a boxcar of sheetrock, for example. On one particular day in midsummer, we were told to go to Uniontown to pick up a load of cinder blocks.*

*Just a couple of days earlier, Dick, whose last name I've forgotten but who managed the yard, had told us that a truck loaded with steel beams had lost its brakes coming down the Brownsville hill from Uniontown. The driver couldn't make the sharp turn halfway down that hill, and he crashed into the building that sat on that curve. The truck, Dick said, smashed into the building and the steel beams slid forward, cutting off the cab and the driver's head.*

*Well, Haze and I didn't think too much about that as we jumped into the truck and headed out with our order for a load of cinder blocks from a cement factory near Uniontown. We went in the big ten-ton truck because we were supposed to get a large number of blocks.*

*Brownsville is about twenty or thirty minutes from Marianna and you come into West Brownsville down a pretty good grade, but nothing like the one on the other side, the one we would be coming down on our way back with the blocks. We crossed the Monongahela River and started up through Brownsville proper. Rounding that sharp turn at Market and old National Pike, we saw the work crews cleaning up the site where that steel truck hit the building. We wondered out loud what it would be like to have your head cut off by steel beams and we knew we weren't going to have any problems like that.*

*To get to the cement factory near Uniontown, we had to go down a very steep hill and then pull sharply left into the yard. When we drove up, one of the workers looked surprised to see us. He had recognized*

our truck, and he turned to say something to his boss, who was in the office.

Well, the boss came out and asked us what we were there for, and I gave him the paperwork. He said something to the worker, but he said it very softly, and neither Haze nor I heard what it was. Well, it turns out they didn't have our load ready, but he said we could have another batch of "fresh" block. I didn't know what "fresh" block was, but "fresh" should be better than "stale," right?

They loaded us up with a fork lift. Now I did notice, once we were loaded, that my springs were flat, showing that this was a big load, but I didn't think past that. Later, I found out that "fresh" block were ones that were still wet and that they weighed almost twice what "seasoned" block weigh. These guys had given us wet blocks and I didn't catch on, and here we were, headed for the Brownsville hill. I should have known something was wrong when we tried to make that sharp turn out of the block yard and the truck didn't want go up the hill in low gear. I had to back up, put it in dual-low and crawl up that hill.

Well, we didn't say much but we weren't dummies either. We knew something was wrong as we approached Brownsville hill (old National Pike). Big signs were all along the roadside saying DANGEROUS HILL. TRUCKS USE LOW GEAR. CHECK BRAKES. They repeated the warnings several times before we actually started downhill.



**Pictured is a view of the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Market Street as it appeared in the 1930s or 1940s. The Brashear House is shown at center. The Shupe building is on the right.**

*So, we got prepared. We were trying to avoid having our heads knocked off by wet cinder blocks as we started down. I had the truck in low gear, and Haze was ready to pull up on the emergency brake if he had to. We were crawling down and doing just fine when the truck jumped out of gear and we started to fly almost immediately!*

*Haze began to pull up on the handbrake as hard as he could but it had no effect, and I could see the muscles and veins about to pop out of his arms and neck. Meanwhile, I was trying to cram it into gear, any gear. Even double clutching didn't get it into one of the higher gears. At this point I'd settle for any gear.*

*No, our lives didn't flash before us like they say, but as we got close to the turn at the bottom of the hill, I was so scared that I revved the engine 'til I thought it would blow and double-clutched it, smashing the shift lever as hard as I could toward second . . . and it went in. When I let the clutch out, I kept holding the lever in second and the engine screamed, but we slowed down barely enough to make the turn from old National Pike onto Market Street.*

*The guys working on the hole in the building didn't seem to notice too much because if they had, they would have scattered. Instead, they just turned to watch us zip by. But I had control now and we were past the worst part. When we got to the bottom of the hill, I pulled off the street and, during a few moments of stillness, we just about trembled to death.*

*When we got back to the lumber yard, I walked into the office, threw the keys on the desk, and told Dick that Haze and I were going home for the day and that I'd tell him tomorrow about what happened. It probably wasn't Dick's fault, but we were miffed at him for not being sure our blocks were ready before he sent us over there.*

On Tuesday, August 24, 1999, the day after Ted emailed this story to me about nearly crashing his runaway truck at the Market Street bend near the Brashear House, a runaway truck roared down new Route 40 to the Market Street bend and crashed into the Brashear House.

On Wednesday, I emailed Ted, told him about the truck (which was carrying a crane) smashing into the Brashear House the day before and asked him if he has a "gift" – a gift of premonition, that is. I also asked him for more details about the story he had told me in Monday's email.

And as for the fatal accident involving the steel-laden truck that Ted mentioned? Many folks still remember that one. Next, the details about it and some photographs from half a century ago.

---

***RECENT CRASH REKINDLES MEMORIES OF 1951 TRAGEDY***

“I remember when a runaway truck carrying steel crashed here a long time ago.”

That remark was heard frequently among onlookers who gathered on the North Side of Brownsville last month [August 1999]. They were at the scene of an accident in which a crane-bearing truck smashed into the side of the Brashear House. What accident was it to which they were referring? Just how long ago was it? And which building did that runaway truck actually hit?

It happened in 1951. The details of that accident are startlingly similar to those of the most recent incident. Like last month’s accident, the 1951 crash happened in the last week of August, it happened at lunchtime, and it happened at the same intersection.

But there was one significant difference. There was a fatality in the 1951 crash. That fact serves as an additional reminder of how fortunate it was that the driver in last month’s accident, Kevin Coonitz of Bellington, W. Va., escaped with only minor injuries.

The 1951 fatal accident happened at noon on Thursday, August 31. The runaway truck ran into the Shupe building, which stood at the corner of Sixth and Market, directly across Sixth Avenue from the Brashear House. The three-story red brick building had apartments upstairs and three businesses on its ground floor. In the left storefront was Montagna’s Barber Shop. In the center was Novak’s Radio and Television Service. To the right of Novak’s was a door leading upstairs to the apartments, and on the right end of the building was Paul Price’s small grocery and convenience store. After this accident, Price moved his store into the Brashear House.

Ironically, the site where the Shupe building once stood is now a grassy vacant lot, and last month’s runaway crane-carrying truck crossed that grass before striking the Brashear House. Had the Shupe building not been demolished when the four-lane highway (new Route 40) was constructed in the 1960s, it might still have been there to absorb the impact in last month’s crash, shielding the older Brashear House as it did so well in 1951.

Here are the details of the 1951 accident. Forty-six-year-old Richard A. Raines of Cleveland was driving a flatbed trailer truck owned by Aetna Freight Lines of Warren, Ohio. He was en route to Detroit with a 27,000-pound load of steel plate. Approaching Brownsville on Route 40, he passed Redstone Cemetery and reached the top of Brownsville hill. Route 40 near Brownsville was called the National Pike until it

crossed the Brownsville Borough line partway down the hill, where it became Broadway.

While descending the steep slope into Brownsville's North Side, the truck's brakes gave out. The heavily loaded vehicle accelerated rapidly, roaring down Broadway toward the intersection where the road took a hard left turn down Market Street. Unable to make the bend, the truck roared across the intersection, plowed through a parked car, sheared off a utility pole, and slammed into Montagna's Barber Shop in the Shupe building.



**W. C. (Red) Giles stands with hands on hips as workers clear wreckage from the Shupe building.**

When the steel-laden flatbed struck the building, the thirteen tons of steel plates slid forward off the trailer and rammed into the cab, crushing the driver and killing him instantly. The truck jackknifed. The terrifying sounds of the crash crescendoed as the trailer, the sliding steel plates, and parts of the cab cascaded across Sixth Avenue and smashed into the wall of the Brashear House at the exact spot where there is now a hole in the building from last month's wreck. An explosion of thick dust blew outward from the left side of the Shupe building as the masonry collapsed and bricks and shattered glass pelted the sidewalk.

Then came an eerie stillness. A choking cloud of dust obscured the scene momentarily, then began rising into the blue noon sky.

Ernest Brown had parked his car along the curb directly in front of Montagna's Barber Shop. Brown operated a grocery store on the southwestern side of Market Street, a few doors down the street from the present site of the North Side Fire Hall. He had just started to enter his parked vehicle when he was hailed by a salesman. As the two men were talking nearby, the truck thundered through the intersection. In an instant, before Mr. Brown's horrified eyes, his car was destroyed.



**The wrecked automobile of grocer Ernest Brown is removed from the scene. Look carefully at the utility pole dangling above the car. It is suspended from the power lines, its bottom portion having been sheared away by the runaway truck.**

DuWayne Swoger was at work at Superior Auto Accessories at 505 Market Street, on the corner where the municipal parking lot is now located. He heard the crash and was among the first to arrive at the accident scene. Later, he went up to his apartment in the Brashear House, got his Century Graphic camera, and took some of the photographs that accompany this column.

DuWayne told me that a story was later circulated around town that Mr. Montagna had a customer in his barber chair when the truck crashed through the front window of his shop. Montagna fled his shop in full barber attire and ran down Market Street toward Pasquale's Barber Shop, located near the present Sheehan's grocery store. Left sitting in the chair



**With the demolished Brown vehicle removed, the damage to the Shupe building and the Brashear House is inspected by curious onlookers.**

was the transfixed customer, miraculously unhurt. As townspeople later remarked, “It’s a good thing he wasn’t shaving the man!”

Norman (Bill) Patterson was a graduate student at the time. From his vantage point on Playford Avenue, he heard the crash, looked down the hill toward the intersection, and saw the cloud of dust. He grabbed a borrowed Kodak Monitor folding camera and took it to the scene with him, arriving minutes after impact. Most of the truck lay against the wall of the Brashear House.

“I believe the wall (of the Brashear House) was two layers of stone thick,” Bill told me. “The outside layer held, though bowed, but the inside layer in the impact area was knocked out inside the house. This was repaired but likely was not as strong as it was originally.”

Rescue efforts began immediately, but the fate of the driver was obvious to all who were at the scene. According to the *Brownsville Telegraph*, “rescue workers could not use acetylene torches to free the driver from the wreckage due to a large amount of gasoline spilled over the area. He had to be pried from his cab with the aid of crowbars. Brownsville firemen were called to the disaster scene to spray the area and wash away gasoline. During rescue operations, the entire area was roped off from hundreds of spectators because of the danger of the gasoline burning.”



Utility workers were dispatched to the scene as well. The telephone pole was sheared off, in Bill Patterson's words, "as if by a great karate chop, leaving the *upper* portion intact (without a wire broken) but unsupported." In a photo of the scene, most of the damaged pole lies across the trailer, which has no steel remaining on it.

A wrecker that was initially brought to the scene was unable to move the ruined vehicle, so a heavy truck was procured from Hankins-Paulson, predecessor of Marcus-Paulson. A thick chain was attached to the end of the trailer, and the Hankins-Paulson vehicle pulled it away from the Brashear House. While all this was going on, traffic was tied up for nearly two hours. Then as now, there is no simple detour around that intersection.

Remarkably, the only person who was injured in any way was the fatally injured driver of the truck. No pedestrians, no other motorists, and no one in the impacted buildings was hurt. It is nearly miraculous that in the 1951 and 1999 accidents combined, no one other than the two drivers was harmed.

There is one other conclusion we can reach from these two accidents. In 1951, the Brashear House took the secondary blow of thirteen tons of steel and the weight of the trailer that carried it. In 1999, it absorbed the direct impact of a truck carrying a crane that became a battering ram. Despite this rude treatment, the two-centuries-old stone building is still standing and ready for its third century. We have seen the proof that the craftsmen who built the Brashear House in the late 1700s surely knew how to put together a solid building.