

**DATE:**  
March 1, 1910

**PLACE:**  
Wellington, Washington

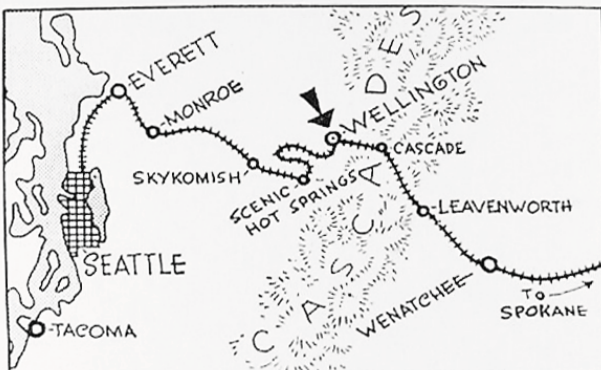
“White Death moving down the mountainside above the trains. Relentlessly it advanced, exploding, roaring, rumbling, grinding, snapping – a crescendo of sound that might have been the crashing of ten thousand freight trains.” Charles Andrews remembered March 1, 1910 for the rest of his life. In the middle of the night, lightning began to crackle overhead and the sound of thunder bore down on the Cascade Mountains where two trains had been trapped in snow for six days.

At the nearby Bailets Hotel, John Wentzel saw the snow begin to crack, the entire slab of white crashing down towards the railroad cars. “It seemed as if the world were coming to an end,” he told others, “I saw the whole side of the mountain coming down, tearing up everything in its way.”

### **SNOW BOUND!**

It had all begun six days before, on February 23rd. Two Great Northern trains – the Spokane Local passenger train No. 25 and the Fast Mail train No. 27 – had been on their way through the Cascade Mountains as they traveled towards Puget Sound. Just after they went through the Cascade Tunnel, bad weather caused both trains to stop because of the amount of snow piled on the tracks. They remained there, stuck while railroad crews tried desperately to get the tracks clear.

The passengers waited inside the trains. The



Courtesy Bob Kelly, Wellington Site Steward, USFS.



James H. O'Neill, railroad superintendent, investigates the wreckage of a railroad car. Taken on March 10, 1910. WSHS Collections.

days seemed longer and longer as food supplies began to run low. Boredom was also a problem. Many of those who waited became impatient. They wanted to leave the train and try to walk to the tiny town of Wellington, carrying children and those who couldn't walk. But the crew said no. They were afraid that walkers would freeze in the cold weather or lose their way.

What the passengers didn't know was that the snow plows had begun to run out of coal. These heavy machines were used to push the snow off the tracks so that the trains could move. But it took a lot of coal to run a snow plow and the railroad company didn't keep enough at Wellington to finish the job – not when the snow was falling at one foot an hour.

### **DEAD MAN'S SLIDE**

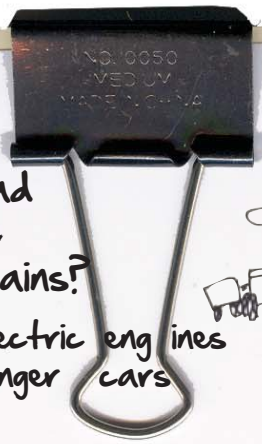
While the blizzard continued to rage outside, reports of snow slides and avalanches were still trickling in. Then, on the 25th, came reports that two men had been killed in a snow slide at Cascade Tunnel Station. The trains had moved away from that spot but the people still on board remembered that they were only a short distance from the place where the snow had collapsed. Was this really the safest place for the trains to wait?

by Gwen Perkins  
Washington State Historical Society, ©2008

**CASE 3: WHERE'S WELLINGTON?**

How many railroad cars were in the two Wellington trains?

- 5 or 6 steam & electric engines
- 15 boxcars, passenger cars & sleepers!



Some didn't think so. As days went by, a small group of passengers and railroaders escaped the train despite the warnings of the crew. They slid down a ravine called "Dead Man's Slide," from the upper rail line to the hotel, risking their lives. But still others remained, waiting for the tracks to clear.

### WHITE DEATH ON WINDY MOUNTAIN

Then it came.

"Trees, stumps, and snow were rolling together in gigantic waves. I saw the first rush of snow reach the track... swallow the trains. And then there was neither tracks nor trains..." Trainmen Wentzel, Andrews, and others who were at the nearby town of Wellington rushed to the place where the trains had disappeared. Forty feet of snow had buried the cars so deeply that it took days to uncover the people who had been inside.

After eleven hours, rescue workers found one woman, Ida Starrett, caught far beneath the snow. A pocket of air had surrounded her, providing enough oxygen for her to survive. When she heard the shovels over her head, she cried out to them, trying to direct them. Starrett said. "I could tell by the sound of their shoveling that they were digging in the wrong place, and told them so. Then they moved nearer and at last I could hear the shovels striking just above my face. I cried a warning." She was pulled out of the snow, in shock and suffering from hypothermia, but alive despite her terrifying experience.

Unfortunately, ninety-six people were not so lucky. Of the people who had been on the trains – passengers and railroaders alike – only twenty-three made it out alive. It was one of the

worst railroad disasters in the history of the United States and is still considered one of the worst natural disasters in Washington State.

### WHERE IS WELLINGTON NOW?

It took three weeks for the Great Northern Railroad to repair the tracks so that trains could resume their run over Stevens Pass through Wellington. But why had the disaster happened at all? Timber cutting and forest fires opened the slopes above the tracks, leaving no trees to help protect the trains from snow slides and that fateful avalanche.

Over time, the railroad built snow sheds to protect trains traveling through that area. In 1929, the new Cascade Tunnel was constructed, allowing trains to take a different – and some would say, safer – route through the deadly mountains.

After the disaster, the town of Wellington "disappeared." It decided to rename itself so that people would forget the tragedy. The town became known as Tye, after a nearby river. But when the new tunnel opened, Tye became a ghost town, haunted by the memory of two trainloads of people, buried deep beneath the snow.

### WORD CLUES

#### Engineer

In railroad terms, someone who operates a train. It can also mean the person who designs, repairs, or builds trains.

#### Hypothermia

A dangerous lowering of body temperature. It is caused when you lose heat faster than your body can produce it.

#### Ravine

A deep, narrow valley with steep slopes.

### EVIDENCE SOURCES

Krist, Gary. *The White Cascade: The Great Northern Railway Disaster and America's Deadliest Avalanche*. Holt, 2007.

Moody, Don. *America's Worst Train Disaster: The 1910 Wellington Tragedy*. Abique, 1988.

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<http://stories.WashingtonHistory.org/railroads>

EVIDENCE

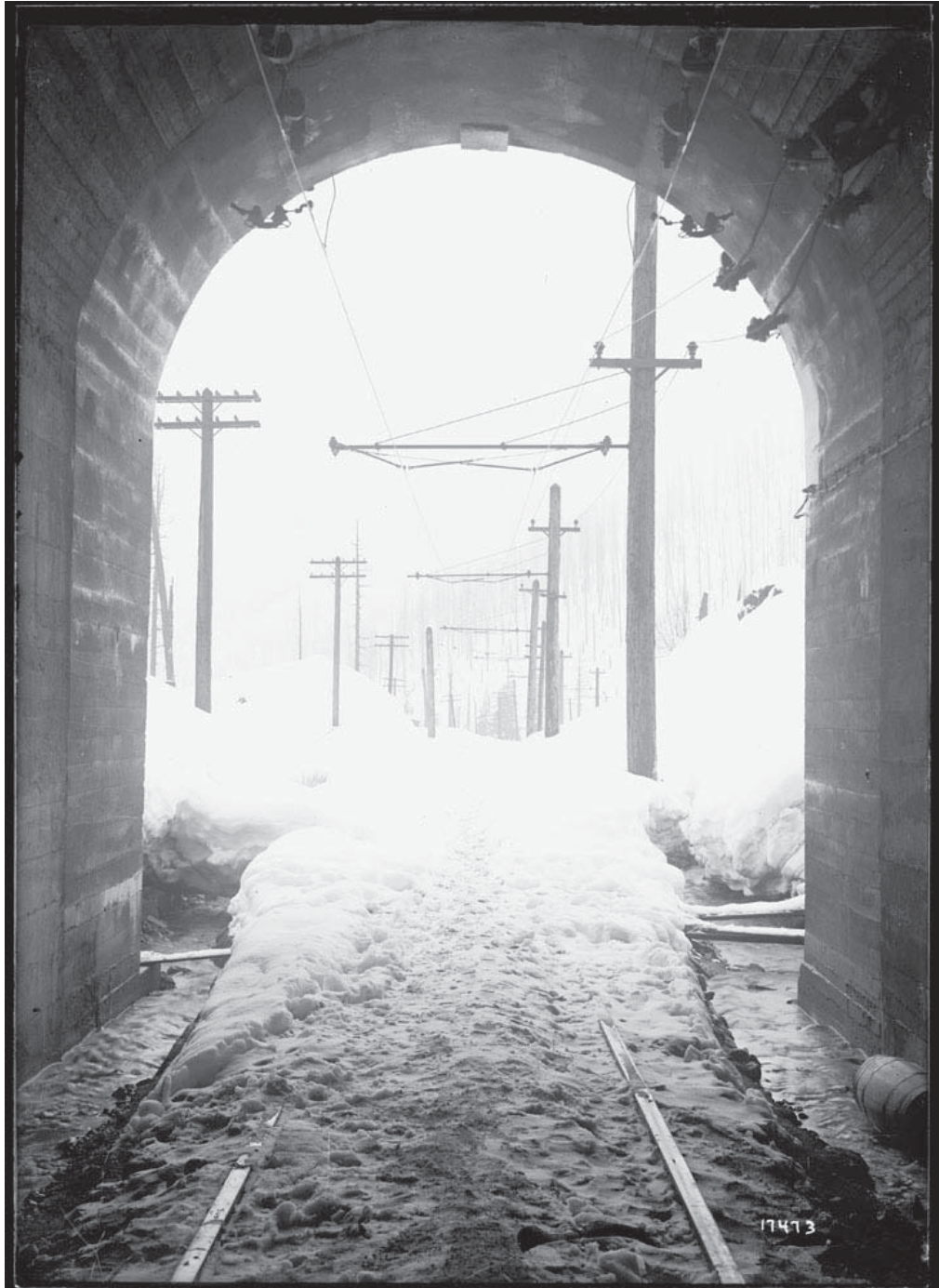


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# EVIDENCE



EXHIBIT " B "  
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# EVIDENCE



# EVIDENCE

**CASE FILE:** Where's Wellington?

**YOUR MISSION:** Review the evidence to determine what happened. Answer the questions below about the case, then write your own report about what happened.

**EYEWITNESS STATEMENT:** "White Death moving down the mountainside above the trains. Relentlessly it advanced, exploding, roaring, rumbling, grinding, snapping — a crescendo of sound that might have been the crashing of ten thousand freight trains. It descended to the ledge where the side tracks lay, picked up cars and equipment as though they were so many snow-draped toys, and swallowing them up, disappeared like a white, broad monster into the ravine below."

— Charles Andrews, railroad engineer



*What Washington town was covered with snow in 1910? See if you can find the answer!  
Washington State Historical Society Collections.*

## WHEN DID THIS DISASTER STRIKE?

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**WHERE DID IT TAKE PLACE?** (Describe where to look for it on a map.)

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**WHO WAS INVOLVED?**

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**WHAT KIND OF NATURAL DISASTER WAS IT?**

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**LIST ONE THING THAT MIGHT HAVE CAUSED THE DISASTER AND ONE RESULT.**

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**USING YOUR NOTES ABOVE, WRITE A SHORT NEWS ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY.** (Use the back of the paper if needed.)

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