

## Book Review

Charity Vogel  
*The Angola Horror*  
Cornell University Press, 2013

Reviewed by: Randy Kazmierski

*The Angola Horror* is a factual and historical publication based upon a railroad tragedy that occurred on December 18, 1867. Charity Vogel presents this interesting story from the beginning of the Buffalo and Erie's route entitled "The New York Express" through the derailment that occurred along its path in Angola, New York and the effects of the aftermath. The research that the author developed for the publication revealed the shocking details of the crash and its consequences for the victims, rescuers, witnesses and the entire country. The book was written in a format that allowed readers to place themselves onboard the 1867 train and experience a closeness and relationship with the eighty-seven characters presented. However, the book is more than a historical account of a train derailment, its effects on a village and the country, and revisions to daily practices. The book has other implications of how a tragedy can have a significant transformation on the social impact of citizens and how advances in technology can outdate required innovation needed to maintain a safe environment.

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The social impact of a tragedy has lasting effects. The Angola horror occurred two-and-one-half years after the Civil War ended. People were adjusting to life, but were very sensitive to death. The deaths from the war created an enduring feeling of anxiety. A major tragedy prior to Christmas 1867 created a reminder of the fragility of life at a time when a country, healing from the scars of war, was preparing to normalize. The mobility that the railroads provided meant more visitations with loved ones, better business contacts between cities, and a mode of transportation isolated from weather conditions. However, the increase in mobility also meant an increased exposure to injury and death. The risks presented a breach of social justice. People expected that some governing body would provide them with safety. People are ready and willing to risk their own lives to help their fellow man during tragedies. The Angola derailment brought people together as they assisted in recovery efforts. Being witness to the charred remains of the unidentified victims and the brutal injuries had lasting social consequences.

The author does not specifically mention the five stages of grief described by grief counselors, but they were evident within the atmosphere on the Angola horror. After the initial shock, denial sets in. Many of the acquaintances of those on board the New York Express did not want to believe that their loved ones were injured or dead. There was anger toward the railroad company. Railroad employees felt a sense of guilt. As people learned the facts of the crash and the

result on up to fifty passengers in the last two passenger cars, depression set in. Angola was a topic amongst the nation, but eventually acceptance was realized.

Tragedies also bring a technological impact to the forefront. As technology progresses in one area, other supporting areas of that advancement lag behind. This undermines technological advancement and endangers people. This was the case with the Angola horror and is the case with many tragedies today. From 1830 to 1860, men and women were in awe of the success and expansion of the railroad industry. The trains were slow moving and mostly used for excursion trips of only a few miles. As technology advanced, larger locomotives with greater velocities carrying bigger groups over hundreds of miles became the norm. The new technology brought increases in train derailments, injured or killed passengers and railroad employees, higher anxiety, and a demoralized public perception. This was due to the technological progression of the railroad that lacked innovation in the support mechanisms such as the flawed and unreliable rail material of iron, coal and wood burning stoves, unreliable switching systems, outdated link and pin couplers, and hand brakes.

In the nineteenth century, there were many railroad accidents. The Angola crash was highlighted as a result of the descriptive newspaper reports and illustrations of how the injured and dead suffered the horrible ordeal. The reports to the public occurred immediately within the newspapers near Angola. Then, like a pebble projected into a calm pond, the reports rippled through the country. Reports of the names of the dead and the number of unidentified provided additional shock. As new train derailments and crashes occurred, references were made to Angola. There are some similarities and differences of the people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have experienced disasters as well. The John F. Kennedy assassination, the Challenger space shuttle explosion, Hurricane Katrina, the WorldTradeCenter attacks, the shootings of Sandy Hook and Columbine, and the Boston Marathon bombing are examples of occurrences that have shocked the people of the United States. Today, this type of news is transmitted almost instantaneously through constant television news coverage, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter accounts.

After a disaster such as Angola, there is usually an investigation to determine root causes. However, many times the investigation is focused on symptoms of the problem rather than the root causes. Without identifying the root causes, the condition can recur. After Angola, many more train derailments, accidents, injuries and deaths still occurred for years. Some innovative solutions to the symptoms were developed. One of the most prominent innovations was an air braking system developed by George Westinghouse Jr. patented in 1869. This invention was capable of stopping a train within a fraction of the time that the old hand braking system could perform. Angola had several potential reasons for the derailment and eventual disaster. There was a six-foot length of bent iron rail, differences in track gauge widths, differences in passenger car wheel gauge widths, speed, a broken wheel, mixed passenger cars from different railroad companies connected together, a bent axle, and a deteriorating bridge. A real root cause analysis was never conducted to determine potential root causes. The quality tools in industry today such as root cause analysis and potential failure modes and effect analysis would have been useful techniques and possibly saved additional loss of lives.

The author concludes the story with an interesting message stating that the fact that the Angola disaster occurred was not a surprise. Based upon the technological advancements of the railroad industry without an equal advancement in the systems that form the foundation of the industry, it is indeed not a surprise. This type of situation could also occur today in new technological advancements. The cellular telephone and associated texting technology is advanced and has resulted in automobile accidents as people lose focus on driving while texting. It remains unknown as to how technological advances in areas such as battery powered vehicles, larger passenger aircraft, and others may also have alternate outcomes. The author also presents a question as to why Angola was forgotten. Although it took many years, Angola was the cause of significant changes in travel safety. Although the railroad industry promised a respectful memorial marker at the crash and burial sites, nothing was ever implemented until recently. Proper burials and recognition were very important to the Christian Victorian era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Failure to follow through on the promises was a final slap at the unidentified victims of Angola. There are many anniversaries of events that Americans are remembered of and honored annually. Angola never received its due recognition. It seems that time heals wounds and in the case of Angola, the unidentified victims have also become the forgotten unidentified victims.

**About the Author:**

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**Editor's Note:** The Angola horror, occurred within months of Canada's confederation in 1867. It was replicated in Lac-Mégantic, Québec on 6 July, 2013 almost 150 years later, when a "run-away" train caused the fourth largest death toll from a derailment in Canadian history and the largest in over 150 years. The number of fatalities in Angola, New York and Lac-Mégantic, Québec was almost identical—about fifty. The matter of culpability and questions of compensation for the victims are the subject of various public inquiries and civil lawsuits. Apart from the material interests of the parties and a variety of parliamentary and judicial processes, fundamental issues of democratic governance are at stake. The first duty of the state is said to be the protection of its citizens. Questions of governmental and corporate negligence in the quest for profits over people are in play. So are larger issues of technology. The immediate cause of the tragedy was an explosion of crude oil that destroyed about half of the downtown area of Lac-Mégantic. The question of transportation of bitumen from the Alberta tar sands—whether by pipeline or by rail—now figures large in public discussions and political deliberations. Absent adequate public safety measures, the Angola tragedy will doubtless be re-enacted again and again. Technological innovation presents stern challenges; political and public policy innovations remain uncertain means to meet them.

– Howard A. Doughty