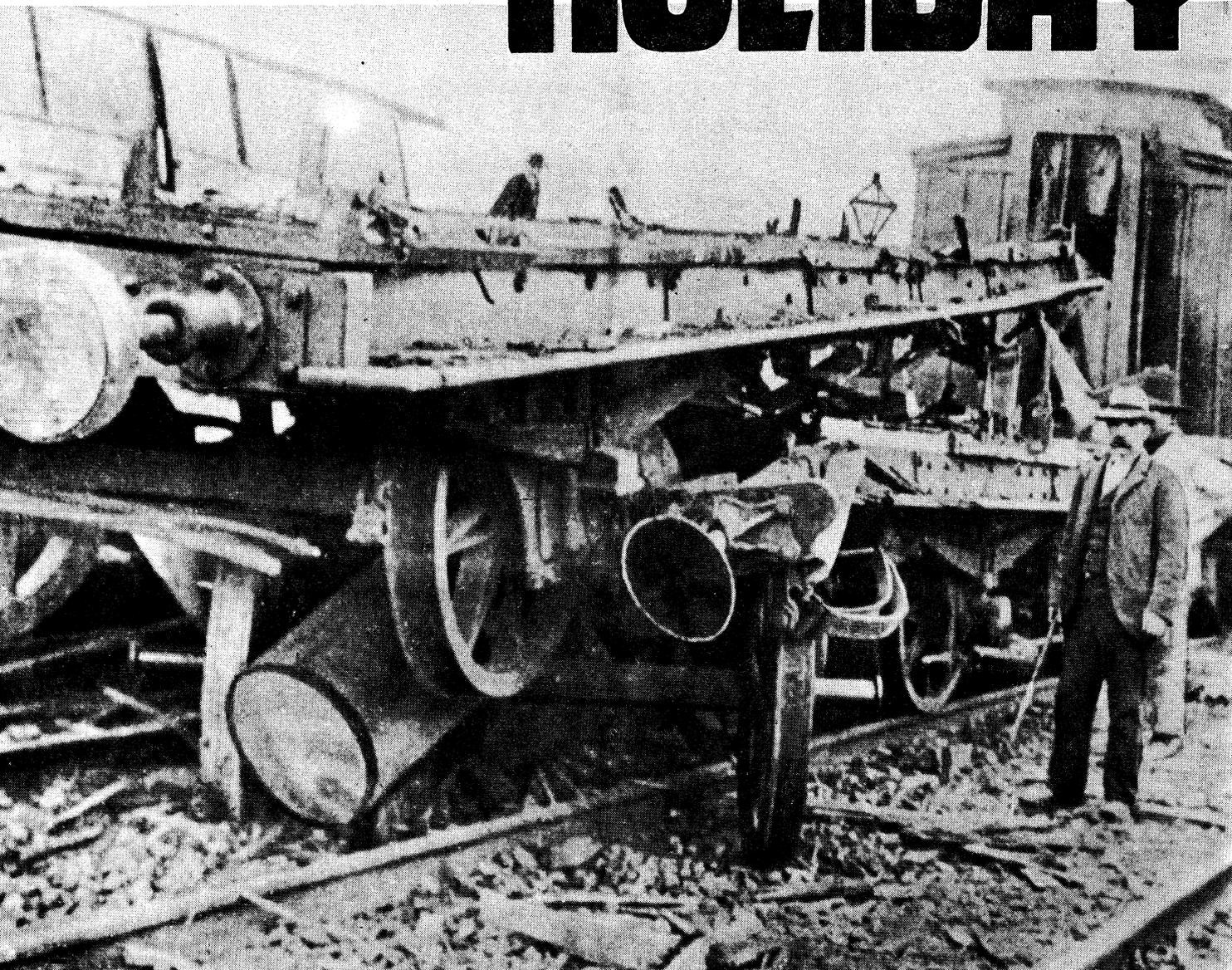


*Sunshine's shocking rail  
smash marred Easter  
celebrations*

# HOLIDAY



EASTER Monday is one of Australia's great holidays. Traditionally for many it marks the end of a four-day break from work . . . and traditionally, many people pour back into the capital cities from a short holiday in the country.

But on Easter Monday, April 21, 1908, what should have been a pleasant journey back into Melbourne for 600 people, turned into a horrific inferno of death and destruction.

At lonely Sunshine station, an express train from Bendigo, drawn by two steam locomotives and travelling fast, ploughed into a crowded train that had just arrived from Ballarat.

Fire broke out amid the wreckage as rescuers scrambled to free people trapped in the mangled wreckage.

When the final toll was counted, 44 had died — and more than 400 had been injured, 72 of them seriously.

Despite the ferocity of the impact, the heavy locomotive of the Bendigo train

was scarcely damaged . . . but the guard's van and last three carriages of the stationary Ballarat train were smashed into matchwood.

The carriage fourth from the rear, packed with holidaymakers like those behind it, had been rammed to less than a quarter of its length!

Naturally all the dead and more seriously injured were from the Ballarat train. The 340 tonnes of steel and wood of the Bendigo train had slammed into it like a battering ram.

One direct cause of the accident — there were two causes as the inquest revealed later — was the negligence of the driver, "Hellfire Tom" Milburn, of the first engine of the Bendigo train.

It was apparent that he had paid little or no attention to the warning red of the "distant" signal, and that the brakes were applied far too late to stop the train and avert the collision.

Eye-witnesses described how, when the brakes were finally applied, the train shot, with wheels locked and flaming from the friction on the track, towards inevitable disaster.

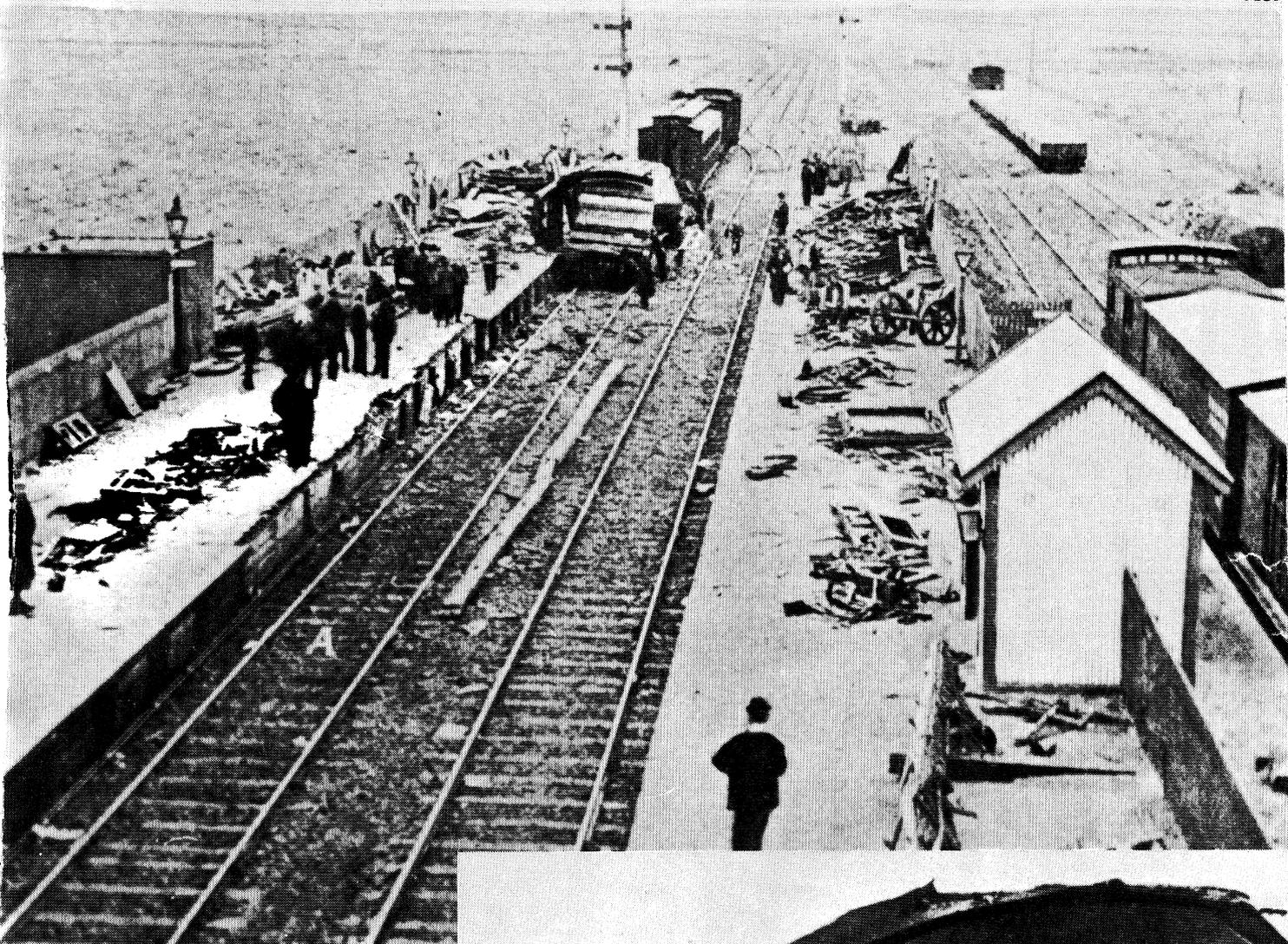
To add to the horror, the wreck caught fire, and some of the victims, unable to be extricated in time, were burnt to death.

While a relief train and ambulances, with doctors and medical supplies, were rushed from the city, newsmen were already on the scene gathering the story of the disaster, which appeared in special editions early next morning.

Reporters found a terrible scene. "The dead and injured were strewn round as on a battlefield." The groans of the injured still in the wreckage were heartrending, and there were screaming appeals for help as the fire neared some of the victims.

All the efforts of the local helpers and

# HORROR



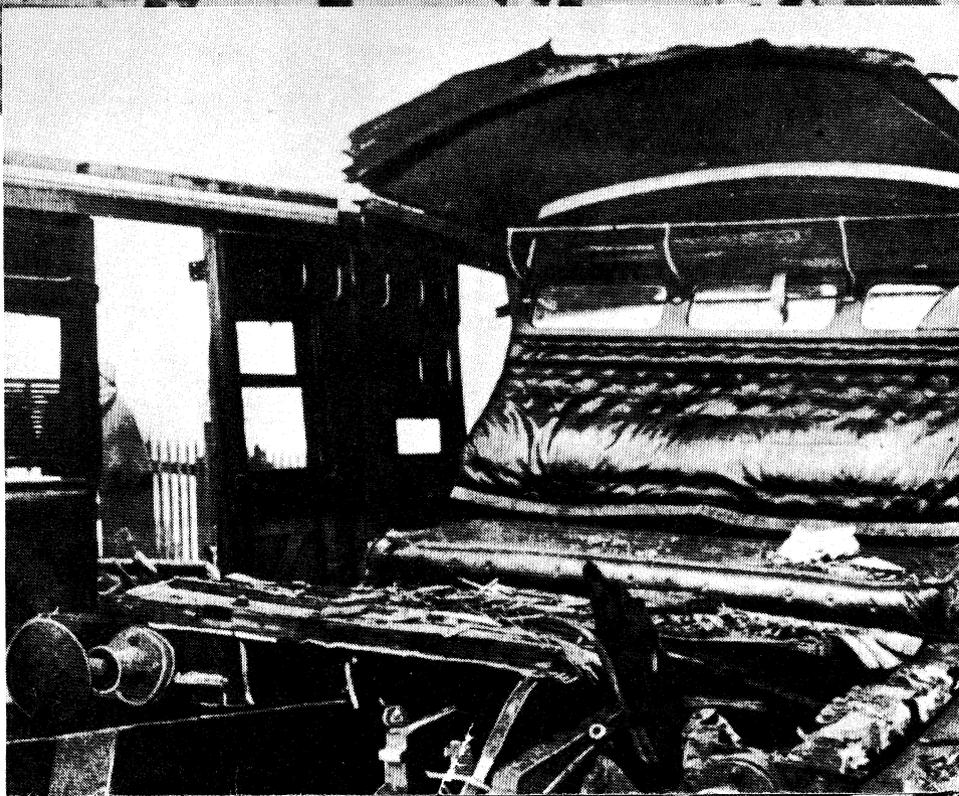
the uninjured passengers could not save all of these in time.

One man, pinned between the undercarriage of the last carriage and the engine above him, cried: "Shoot me! Shoot me, for God's sake!" until death mercifully took him.

This scene of human anguish, lit by the flames, caused some of the rescuers to faint at their tasks, and they, too, had to be dragged away from the wreck while others took their places.

About two and a half hours after the collision the first relief train, carrying those passengers whose injuries were so slight as to require only elementary first-aid, and the unhurt, left Sunshine. Meanwhile the work of extricating the dead and injured went on.

Spencer St. Station was crowded with friends and relatives who had expected their kinsfolk by the wrecked train. They rushed the platform — some wild with anxiety because those they sought were



not on the train, others hysterical with relief as they embraced loved ones.

Among the unhappy people at Spencer St. was Mr. Thomas Tait, the Chief Railway Commissioner, who was besieged with questions he could not answer, and abused by some, who, wild with grief and terror, sought to blame him for their losses.

After midnight, the second relief train stole in silently as though seeking to hide the burden of pain and mortality it bore.

The first carriages were lighted, though the curtains were drawn. Behind lay the injured with their attendant doctors and ambulance workers.

Later carriages were dark. They carried those who would need lights no more.

As the dim illumination of the electric globes on the platform shone into them, the waiting crowd saw the pale faces and stiffened hands of the dead, who lay on the seats and the floor.

Old and young, men, women and children, some bearing few marks of their final passage, others fearfully mutilated, passed in procession as the train slid gently to a stop with its tragic burden.

The dead were laid out in rows upon the floor of a shed at the end of the platform. The police let no one into this charnel house except those who sought to identify their dead. There were many heart-rending recognitions. In other cases the seekers, having examined that ghastly parade carefully, came away with faces of relief and joy.

Melbourne was stunned by the news. When the first horror had been overcome, the disaster remained the daily headline for three weeks. The Press was full of letters demanding Royal Commissions. Mr. Tait, the Chief Commissioner for Railways, admitted that servants of the railways must have failed in their duties for his much-vaunted "foolproof" block system to have broken-down.

Members of the Melbourne Club sought heads on platters. Those who had been spared from the crash gave more or less coherent accounts of their experiences. The dead were buried and the injured convalesced; except one man who died two days after the crash, bringing deaths up to 44.

The drama of the disaster, however, was not over. The first step to revive it was the inquest, postponed for more than three weeks while railway inquiries were being made and counsel were instructed.

Then the coroner, Dr. Cole, empanelled a jury of nine citizens, at which a Labor MP objected because none of them were railwaymen.

The Coroner's Court took voluminous evidence from dozens of witnesses. The jury made careful examination of the scene of the accident, and had the block system (which Mr. Tait had declared a week before the disaster was foolproof and made accidents impossible) explained by railway experts.

No system, however, is proof against the negligence of its operators. One careless railway servant could not, perhaps, destroy safety, but two could,



and, as the evidence went on, it became apparent that there had been a double negligence.

The block system depended primarily upon the check against any two trains being upon the same line between any two stations. Before a train left a station it had to receive the "all clear" from the station ahead.

For instance, the Ballarat train, having received permission to leave Deer Park for Sunshine, the Bendigo train should not have left Sydenham until the "all-clear" was received from Sunshine after the Ballarat train's departure from the junction.

A sensation was caused when the Sunshine station-master admitted that he had in fact sent the all clear to both Sydenham and Deer Park. He admitted that he had also done this on former occasions.

Yet even despite this, had the driver kept to the rules pertaining to signals, the accident would not have happened.

The rule on signals is common in railway practice. The "distant" signal is placed far away from a station to permit a train to be pulled up long before it reaches the "home" signal, close to a station. When the "distant" signal is against a train, the driver must reduce speed to a limit which makes it easily stopped before it reaches the "home" signal.

Driver Leonard Millburn, whose nickname in the service was "Hellfire Tom," because of his fast driving and the speed with which he passed through stations, admitted that the distant signal was against him. He declared that he had shut down the throttle, but not closed it, and reduced the speed.

When he saw the red tail-light of the Ballarat train he had, he said, put on the brakes, but they failed to act.

He then reversed the engine — an emergency measure. The brakes of the train were later examined and tested by experts. They were found after the accident to be in perfect condition.

It was obvious to the jury that he had run past the distant signal at a dangerous speed in defiance of a general rule, pro-

bably relying on the "all-clear" he had received at Sydenham.

Passengers gave evidence that there was no perceptible reduction of speed until, at the last moment. Outside observers confirmed this.

In the face of these admissions of disobedience to the safety rules, the station-master at Sunshine, Kendall; Milburn, the driver of the first engine, and Dolman, driver of the second, were found by the jury to have shown negligence, and were committed for trial by the Coroner on a charge of manslaughter.

The proceedings against Kendall were dropped, but in August there was an application by the prosecution for a special jury. Mr. Justice Hodges refused this, and the following month (September 11) Milburn and Dolman were brought before the Chief Justice, Sir John Madden, in the Court of Quarter Sessions. They were defended by Mr. Maxwell — the blind KC.

The two engine-drivers were acquitted. "Milburn," says the report, "was much affected, burst into tears, and was unable to leave his seat for several minutes, when he left the court in company with his son."

The last echoes of this resounding crash died out in the law courts in the following year.

Among the victims were a young man and his wife, not long married, returning on a holiday from Ballarat. He had a business of some value and at his marriage had made a will leaving her his estate.

With the double death the estate passed to the next of kin, as in an intestacy. The husband's relatives claimed, and the bride's people put in a caveat. If she had survived her husband, even by a minute, she had inherited the estate.

Witnesses, consisting of survivors and rescuers were examined without result, and the court came to the conclusion that in the absence of direct evidence of priority of death, the presumption must be that they died simultaneously.

The judgment went in favor of his next-of-kin.