

Ithaca Has History of Crashes

Mary Raddant Tomlan, October 4, 2014



Photo caption:

This accident that took place on South Aurora and East State streets on January 16th, 1985 bears a disturbing resemblance to the one that took place on June 20th, 2014.

In the weeks following the June 20th accident in which a vehicle-carrying tractor trailer traveling down East State Street crashed into Simeon’s restaurant at The Commons and Aurora Street, claiming the life of Amanda Bush and causing injury, damage and disruption, I came across two unexpected and sobering reminders of that tragic event.

While scrolling through a microfilm copy of the 1955 *Ithaca Journal*, an editorial published on January 4 caught my attention. “Forceful Action Needed” stated the headline, as the text below noted a recent accident in which a tractor trailer loaded with motor oil in cans and drums was unable to stop when coming down the South Aurora Street hill and ended up near the intersection of State and Aurora Streets with “miraculously” no fatalities but with “serious injuries and considerable property damage.”

The next paragraph noted that “the city has taken steps before. There have been other accidents caused by runaway vehicles. After each such incident there has been talk of better control of truck traffic on Ithaca hills. Then the indignation and the talk dies down. The rules and regulations now on the books are ineffective.”

“No halfway measures will suffice,” the 1955 editorial continued. “The appropriate agencies of the city, county, and state must get together and act quickly and forcefully. There must be the fullest measure of cooperation by police agencies in enforcement of whatever regulations are set up.”

My second reminder of the recent accident was a photograph (reproduced here) in *Tompkins County Memories*, a 2003 publication presented by the Ithaca Journal and the DeWitt Historical Society (now The History Center in Tompkins County). Chilling in its apparent similarities, the image shows the immediate aftermath of a January 16, 1985 accident in which a runaway moving van came down South Aurora Street and hit two cars before crushing a third against the corner of Simeon’s and killing the driver, Lucretia Bowles.

Following the January 1955 accident cited above, the Common Council had acted quickly, requiring trucks on South Aurora Street to proceed down the hill in their lowest gear and at a rate of no more than 10 m.p.h. Though West and East Hill routes had also seen runaway truck accidents, the application of restrictions to those hills was reserved for further study, and perhaps to await confirmation of the proposed Route 13 East Hill bypass.

Discussions about the new legislation and efforts to put it into effect highlighted the difficulties in promoting safer conditions, from questions about enforcement or about the location of a sign relative to the City limits and the existing grade, to conflicts with State laws regarding gear restrictions and speed.

Whatever actions were taken as a result of the 1955 legislation, they proved insufficient, as may be seen from an article that accompanied the *Journal*’s report of the 1985 accident. Under the headline “South Aurora Street’s killer hill: A legacy of death and injury,” the article noted that a truck or bus was reported to have lost its brakes on that hill “at least two dozen times” in the 1960s, citing ten such accidents that had resulted not only in injury and property damage but in four deaths. It attributed the relative safety of the ensuing years to the fall 1969 construction of the truck turn-off and brake checkpoint at the top of South Aurora Street-Route 96B grade.

A cursory survey of accidents involving trucks and hills in Ithaca since 1940 has revealed various illegalities and contributing factors, from unlicensed or inattentive drivers to overweight or mechanically defective vehicles to inadequate accommodations for unexpected grade changes or road conditions. While addressing these through regulatory and infrastructure changes comes with the expenditure of both public and private funds, it

is clear from history and recent experience alike that each such accident brings significant and sometimes tragic costs to families, businesses and, indeed, the broader community.

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