

Town remembers three children struck by train



JOPLIN, Mo. (AP) — The scene is awful beyond belief — a four-engine freight train bears down on three children stranded on a trestle high above a shallow, sun-dappled fishing hole.

Hand-in-hand they try to flee, scrambling over rough-hewn railroad ties and the 6-inch gaps between them as their stepfather, frantic on the creek bank below, screams for them to run faster.

They almost made it.

"They would have been better off if they had jumped," said police Lt. Ed Brown. "But they all joined hands and ran."

They had reached the end of the 102-foot, one-track trestle but were still 20 feet from level ground and safety when the locomotive, braking but unable to stop 112 rolling cars laden with coal, ran them down.

Melissa Seay, 12, and her 9-year-old brother, William, known as "Bud," were killed instantly Sunday. The youngest, 5-year-old Austin, held on until Monday.

The Seay siblings were buried Thursday. Six hundred people gathered for funeral services at the Central Christian Center, housed in an ornate, old downtown Joplin movie theater.

Austin's coffin was flanked by those of his sister and brother, mirroring their places as they raced across the trestle. Mementos were tucked in beside them: a teddy bear for Melissa, toy cars for the boys.

The tragic poignancy of their joint funeral echoed the very closeness that may have contributed to their deaths.

"They all stuck together. They had the youngest by the hand, and Bud's leg slipped through the space between the ties. The other two went back to get him," said Larry Sherman, a family friend and pallbearer. "They almost made it."

At North Middle School, where Melissa was finishing sixth grade, teacher Diane Elliott cleared the girl's locker this week and recalled her last conversation with Melissa, on Friday before the Memorial Day weekend. Like so many times before, Melissa was teasing her.

"She flashed a big smile and said she wasn't coming back, that she was going to have her dad call in sick for her because she didn't think she should go to school in

June," Elliott said. "She was looking forward to her vacation."

Classes ended Wednesday, and departing classmates had pasted signs around Melissa's locker. "Love you always," read one, and "She was one of my best friends." A third stood out: "This locker is declared retired by all of her friends."

Principal Jim Coburn said some classmates had suggested the locker be retired, set aside and never used again, as with the uniform numbers of sports heroes.

"There will be some type of memorial for her," Coburn said.

Across town at McKinley Elementary School, family members came by Wednesday to collect one of fifth-grader Bud's art projects, now an irreplaceable treasure. In a discarded shoebox, Bud had created a diorama, a scene of miniature clay trees and the dinosaurs that fascinated him.

"You look at some people and they have a pleasant look on their face, and he was like that," said his principal, Doris Conyers.

Sherman, the family friend, said the children had just come home Sunday afternoon from a weekend nearby with their father, Tom Seay, when their stepfather, Gregory McPherson, packed them off to Turkey Creek, a popular spot to catch catfish and perch.

As the sunshine gave way to slanting evening shadows, the children left McPherson fishing and climbed up the loose rocks on a steep incline to the rusty trestle, which runs north to south about 24 feet above the creek. An old sign posted near the track warns against trespassing on railroad property.

"We don't know why they were up there, probably exploring and playing like kids do," said police Sgt. John Jensen, the lead investigator.

Jensen said the children were about a quarter of the way across when a southbound Kansas City Southern Railway Co. train rounded a curve about 825 feet behind them — the first glimpse engineer Martin Wade would have of the children.

"The engineer had only a few seconds to see the chil-

dren, about 18 seconds before reaching the trestle," said Jensen.

The train was traveling no more than 30 mph up a gradual grade, and Wade braked immediately, Jensen said. It still took the heavy train 1,469 feet to stop after it hit the children.

"We are talking about in excess of 30 million pounds coming down the track, and you need a lot of room to stop with that kind of mass," Jensen said.

Wade, reached at his home in Heavener, Okla., declined to talk about the accident.

Anthony Reynolds, 11, who was fishing nearby, said he had heard McPherson warn the children not to stray too far. "All of a sudden, I heard the beep of the train," the boy said. "Their dad said, 'Run! Run!'"

Jensen said the children's only other route to safety was to jump over the edge, a choice that might have seemed even more frightening.

"Their only thought was to run away from danger. To them that would have been less scary than jumping," he said.

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— Sgt. John Jensen, lead investigator

At the Wednesday night visitation at a funeral home, the children's mother, Monica McPherson, spoke privately with friends and family. McPherson said she just didn't feel like talking.

"All the could-be's and would-be's don't count after the accident. All that counts is that there's a great loss," the stepfather said.

Their father also was there and said he couldn't blame McPherson for the tragedy.

"I'm not holding a grudge against anybody at this time," Seay said.

A former babysitter, Jeannie Armijo, 22, came to Turkey Creek on Wednesday to show a friend the place of tragedy. She remembered the children as "fun kids."

"Melissa was smart and sophisticated," she said. "Bud was a normal little boy, and Austin was a hyper child."

At the trestle, someone planted three small crosses beside the rail bed and covered them with flowers.

Poll says support increasing for ban on handgun sales

WASHINGTON (AP) — More Americans than ever support a ban on handgun sales, saying it is needed for the safety of children in an increasingly violent society, according to a poll released Thursday.

The poll of 1,250 adults conducted April 3-12 by Louis Harris of LH Research Inc. found 52 percent in favor of a ban and 43 percent opposed.

That would be the first time a majority of Americans expressed support for a ban, Harris said. But the margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points, leaving the possibility that support was as high as 55 percent or as low as 49 percent.

Previous polls have shown overwhelming support for a five-day waiting period for handgun purchases. Harris called the latest results "a sea change of public opinion on this issue."

Growing fear for the safety of children in an increasingly violent society appears to have focused attention on gun-control

as a solution, Harris said.

Only 25 percent of adults surveyed felt that most children live in safe neighborhoods, and only 29 percent said most children attend schools free of violence.

The poll also found:

— 18 percent of adults knew of at least one youngster killed or wounded by another child with a gun.

— 14 percent of adults and 16 percent of parents knew of children found playing with a loaded gun.

— 13 percent of adults knew of a child killed or wounded by a gun fired by an adult.

Americans in increasing numbers have concluded that "guns they are getting for their self-protection are a menace in their lives," Harris said.

Although 42 percent of adults reported having a gun in the household, many expressed doubts about whether such weapons actually afford more protection,

Harris said.

Fifty-nine percent reported feeling more secure owning a gun, 14 percent felt less secure and 27 percent weren't sure.

Harris said 25 percent of those favoring a ban on handguns expressed willingness to vote against those who disagreed.

Previous polls have shown that opponents of gun control are more likely to vote as a group against politicians who favor stricter laws.

A lower proportion of opponents of gun control — 19 percent — expressed willingness to vote against candidates who disagreed with them on the issue.

The results also suggest that gun control could become "the next great women's issue in the country," Harris said. He compared a change in attitudes about toward handguns to the crystallization of public support for abortion rights.

Sixty-one percent of women favored banning handguns compared to only 44

percent of men, Harris said.

James Baker, a spokesman for the National Rifle Association, criticized the findings.

"They are asking people to respond to one side of the argument, they never ask them the critical question: Will any of these gun-control proposals actually work?" Baker said.

Susan Whitmore, spokeswoman for Handgun Control Inc., cited a number of actions by state legislatures to strengthen gun-control laws as evidence of the shift in public opinion.

Virginia enacted a law restricting handgun purchases to one a month per person, and New Jersey defeated an attempt to repeal a ban on semi-automatic weapons.

The poll was commissioned by the Harvard University School of Public Health and sponsored by the Joyce Foundation, a Chicago-based organization that sponsors studies on a variety of social issues.

Leisure Studies and Services Workshops

For more information, please contact the Department of Leisure and Services (180 Esslinger Hall; 46-1028). Brochures available on request.

The Department of Leisure Studies and Services has purposefully scheduled classes to compliment the majority of the University of Oregon's Summer Session classes. Campus wide, more than 90 percent of classes are offered Monday through Thursday (or Friday). Each of the workshops start at 12:00 noon on Friday until 4:50 p.m.; 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. While the academic assignments vary, generally a paper or project report is assigned and due within two weeks of the completion of the workshop. The Environmental Awareness workshops give students a rare opportunity to truly understand the many facets of our region. Students will be close to the things they study: see, smell, hear and touch in order to gain a wide perspective and a magical appreciation for Oregon. Attendance and satisfactory completion of the assignment are mandatory to receive a passing grade. Following are one to two credit workshops currently offered in Leisure Studies and Services during Summer Session:

Environmental Awareness

- Deschutes Headwaters..... June 10-13
- River Recreation..... June 16-20
- Deserts..... June 25-27
- Volcanic Cascades..... July 9-11
- Crater Lake..... July 16-18
- Tidepools..... July 23-25
- Rivers..... July 30-August 1
- Dunes & Beaches..... August 6-8
- Lakes..... August 13-15
- Environmental Projects..... August 18-22
- Wilderness..... August 27-29

Substance Abuse Prevention Program

- DART..... June 30-July 2

- Research Adolescent..... July 28-30
- Substance Abuse
- Adult Child of Alcoholics..... July 12-14
- Alcohol College Student..... August 4-5
- Drugs & Sports..... July 8-9
- AAHE/BEST..... July 19-21
- OR Institute of Addiction Studies..... July 26-30
- Conference at Lewis & Clark College
- Tobacco Prevention..... Conference, July 14-16
- Hazard
- Compulsive Behavior..... Conference, July 21-23
- Organization & Operation..... June 28-30
- Peer Helper
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome..... June 21-23
- Drug Abuse..... June 23-25
- Prevention Education
- AIDS & Other STDs..... July 26-28

Recreation and Tourism

- Leisure/Work Motives..... June 18-20
- Event Management..... June 18-20
- Consumer Behavior..... June 25-27
- International Tourism..... July 2-4
- Computer Information..... July 9-11
- Systems in Tourism
- Festival Management..... July 16-18
- Delivering quality Leisure Services..... July 23-25
- Canadian Tourism..... July 30-August 1
- Oregon Tourism: Issues..... August 6-8
- and Opportunities
- Sustainable Tourism..... August 13-15 and 20-22
- this is a 3 credit class