TONS OF POISONOUS PHENOL WERE BARRELING TOWARD KENTON, OHIO. THEY HAD TEN MINUTES TO STOP THE

RUNAWAY TRAIN

By William M. Hendryx

LOOKING OUT the weather-streaked window of the control tower 40 feet above the Toledo rail yard, Jon Hosfeld anxiously scanned the maze of tracks and belching locomotives. Just then a light on the electronic map of the yard's main tracks flashed white—confirming his fear. A freight train had run a switch and was rolling onto the main line into high-speed traffic. In 31 years with the railroad, Hosfeld had never seen that happen.

A bizarre sequence of events had set the train loose. There are three braking systems on a train. Leaving the cab, the engineer had set two—but when he reached for the third, he grabbed the throttle instead. After he stepped out, the locomotive hauling 47 cars pulled away. Two of the cars in the CSX Transportation freight contained molten phenol, a poisonous chemical used in making adhesives, dyes and paints. A wreck could release a lavalike flood of the toxin.

Hosfeld and another supervisor

PHOTO: © FRANK CEZUS/FPG/GETTY IMAGES

dashed down the tower and leapt into a truck. Believing the train was just coasting, they planned to race to the first crossing, jump aboard and stop it. Just 12 minutes later, calculating that they were well ahead of a slow-moving train, they pulled up to a crossing in the tiny village of Dunbridge and surveyed the tracks. There was no train in sight—it had already gone through.

Hosfeld almost choked at the realization: "It's not coasting—it's under power!"

It was about 12:40 p.m., May 15, 2001, and hundreds of unprotected crossings and dozens of towns lay in the train's path. A loaded freight under power was a weapon weighing thousands of tons. It could blast through a village like a Tomahawk missile. The town in greatest danger was Kenton, about 70 miles south. There was a steep downhill grade and 25-m.p.h. curves as the track weaved into town, passing fuel storage tanks, gas stations and homes. If the runaway crashed into those tanks, there could be an inferno.

Instantly railway officials warned police in towns all along the line.

AT THAT MOMENT a gleaming blue and yellow locomotive was leaving Kenton headed north, directly into the path of the runaway. Engineer Jess Knowlton, 48, and conductor Terry Forson, 30, were piloting the big engine labeled Q636. They had heard reports about a driverless train on their radio, but had no idea where it was. Just then a dispatcher's voice jarred them: "Q636, you need to get into a siding ASAP!"

The nearest siding was ten miles straight ahead. Knowlton stiffened. He glanced at his young, sandy-haired conductor. Both men wore jeans and short-sleeve shirts, safety glasses and steel-toed work boots. "Hey, kid, you know what we're doing?" asked the wiry, 28-year veteran.

Forson, tall and strongly built, had only 14 months with the railroad and just two riding with Knowlton—but he knew. "Yeah," he said, swallowing hard, "we're racing against something head-on."

The radio squawked again. "636, get into the siding now!"

FIGHTING THEIR WAY through traffic in Bowling Green, Jon Hosfeld and his co-worker Mike Smith made it back to the interstate. They darted around cars at speeds up to 95 m.p.h. Finally they spotted the runaway off

ILLUSTRATED BY JARED SCHNEIDMAN DESIGN

to their left—vapor streaming from its exhaust stacks, its brakes squealing. It was under full power. "Look at that S.O.B. go!" Hosfeld said.

JESS KNOWLTON NERVOUSLY nudged the throttle on Q636 to the eighth notch—full out. The engine was howling. If they popped over a hill and hit the runaway, it was all over. But minutes later, steel squealing against steel, he ran his train onto the siding—15 m.p.h. over the speed limit. As they ground to a stop, Knowlton took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

Moments later a call came from the dispatcher. He asked that they secure their cars, disconnect their locomotive and move it to the north end of the mile-and-a-half-long siding. Then came a final appeal: "Once the runaway goes by, you've got to go after it."

It's insane, he thought, but only his engine could stop the loose train.

That's insane! Jess Knowlton thought. But he also saw the logic. His engine was the only thing that could stop the runaway before it barreled into Kenton.

Knowlton keyed his microphone. "We understand," he answered simply—but his body was surging with adrenaline.

Waiting for the runaway, Knowlton used his cell phone to call his wife, Hollie. He didn't have time to explain, he said. Just turn on the news. "This may be the last time we talk." And he told her goodbye.

Forson overheard the conversation and wondered if he should call home. Then it was too late. The earth began to shake, and the two trainmen heard the bellowing roar of a 3000-horse, diesel-powered locomotive. Knowlton and Forson turned to one another. "Good God!" they said in unison. They, too, had been expecting a string of coasting cars, not a train running at full throttle. Stopping a coasting train would have been challenge enough. This monster was racing south at almost 50 m.p.h. Stopping that was unimaginable.

ALERTED BY railroad officials, law enforcement agencies established roadblocks at dozens of crossings in four counties. Evacuations in Kenton were already underway, and Jon Hosfeld and Mike Smith abandoned their chase to speed directly there.

Along the line, the runaway had been routed through slow-speed sidings in the hope that it would derail in an unpopulated area. Three times it had overrun the switch and plowed back onto the main line. At one point railway workers rushed out and set a portable derailing device onto the track. The 50-pound wedge-

"Catch It!"– The dispatcher's order sent Hosfeld, Knowlton and Forson on the ride of their lives.

shaped chunk of steel worked on trains traveling at slow speeds. But the racing locomotive hit the derailer, kicked the device aside like a roller skate and sped on toward Kenton.

As the runaway shook past them, Knowlton and Forson jumped into action. Knowlton stood at the throttle facing a network of gauges and levers. Forson was at his side, coordinating switch alignments with the radio dispatcher. When they were back on the main line, the dispatcher gave them the order: "Go catch it!"

They had about ten minutes before the runaway hit the downhill curve into Kenton. Knowlton turned around to look backward out a narrow window—the engine housing blocked half his view. Yet the entire chase would have to be done in reverse. On right-hand curves, he'd be blinded completely. Forson would have to guide him.

Of course, he'd operated in reverse thousands of times in rail yards, on straight track, inching along. Never at speeds approaching 70 m.p.h. No one had ever done that. But now he shoved the throttle forward to the eighth notch.

As the 190-ton locomotive gathered speed, Forson darted outside down the narrow gangway that ran the length of the engine and took a position on the rear platform. From there, he'd give Knowlton arm signals about turns and the approach to the runaway. The train was shaking so badly he had to grab the waist-high railing with both hands and spread his feet wide just to keep his balance.

For safety, the rule book said that without cars attached, a locomotive the size of Knowlton's wasn't to exceed 30 m.p.h. It was too prone to derailment. But rules were useless now. The runaway was about two miles ahead. They would have to catch it before it went another six.

In less than two minutes, Jess Knowlton pushed Q636 to over 65 m.p.h. He had about four minutes until they hit the downhill. The massive locomotive heaved from rail to rail. If it came off the tracks, there was little chance of survival.

Three minutes left. Knowlton leaned on the whistle as they blew through one road crossing after another. At this speed, he would never be able to stop if a car pulled into his path. He pressed so hard the metal whistle handle broke off in his hand. "Damn!" he said, tossing it aside.

They had maybe two minutes left.

On the rear deck, the wind blasted Terry Forson. He held on with all he had, swaying 18 inches side to side as the wheel flanges caught one rail and bounced to the next. He fought to keep his focus, signaling speed changes to Knowlton, scanning the horizon.

Just then, Forson spotted the runaway, a hopper car at its tail. The

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL O'NEILL

car was loaded with grain, and the rush of wind pelted his face with corn.

They were 90 seconds from the downhill. Forson prepared for impact. He pulled himself along the railing toward Knowlton; then he sat on the steel gangway, pressed his back to the cab door and wrapped both arms around a steel pipe.

Knowlton deftly inched Q636 closer. *Here we go,* he thought. The gap between the two trains narrowed quickly. Too quickly! They were moving at ten times the normal coupling speed. If they hit too hard, they would knock the hopper car from the track, derail the train and plow straight into it.

They had less than a minute. Knowlton eased off the throttle and tapped the brakes, slowing to 50. Then 40. Two car lengths away now. "Easy. Easy ..."

Thirty seconds.

Wham! The impact was jarring, but not catastrophic. But had they coupled?

Forson jumped to his feet and hurried back to his post on the rear deck. He signaled thumbs-up to Knowlton. The coupling was good.

Now what? Knowlton wondered. The two engines were in a tug of war, with 47 cars between them. If just one coupling in the string snapped, they'd all fly off the rails.

Knowlton let the trains settle, easing the slack between cars as Forson returned to the cab. He then applied full dynamic braking, a process akin to reverse thrust on a jet engine. The effect was almost immediate. The runaway slowed to 30 m.p.h., 20 ... 10.

Then just as suddenly, the speed began to climb again. The great mass of the runaway was pulling them over the crest onto the downhill track. The speed jumped to 15, then 20 m.p.h.

Knowlton leaned on the brake levers. At 22 m.p.h., he felt them grab again. He had no hope of stopping the runaway completely—not with its throttle wide open. But if he could slow it enough to get safely through Kenton, perhaps someone could scramble aboard and shut it down.

He eased the throttle, tapped the brakes ... Wham! came the impact.

Seconds later they rounded the first bend into Kenton—and there below was the fuel depot. Knowlton checked his speed. It was just under the maximum for the curve.

WAITING AT the other end of town, Jon Hosfeld stood in the middle of a blocked-off road crossing. He knew he'd get only one chance at this. As a much younger man, he'd often leapt aboard slow-moving trains in

rail yards. But at 12 m.p.h., this train wasn't creeping and he was 52 years old.

The train was bearing directly down on him now, its engine still howling. As it swept past, Hosfeld took two quick side steps, reached for the railing with both hands and kicked up his left foot.

In that instant, he was jerked from the pavement. His foot caught a step, and he hoisted himself onto the platform. Then he scrambled inside the locomotive and jammed the throttle off.

At the opposite end of the train, Jess Knowlton felt the power come down immediately. "It's over," he said to Forson, "... nobody's hurt."

They powered down Q636, set all three braking systems and, totally exhausted, exited their cab. They had done the unimaginable—caught, coupled and stopped a runaway train. And saved the town of Kenton.

Works in Progress

In his book, *Non Campus Mentis* (Workman), history professor Anders Henriksson has compiled dozens of less-than-shining examples of college students' writings, culled from actual term papers and blue-book exams. "The spelling may be avant-garde and logic experimental," says Henriksson, "but no one can fault these young scholars for lack of creativity." A random sampling:

- There was Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Lower Egypt was actually farther up than Upper Egypt, which was, of course, lower down than the upper part.
- Cesar inspired his men by stating, "I came, I saw, I went." When he was assassinated, he reportedly said, "Me too, Brutus!"
- Westward expansion ended at Custard's Last Stand and his later defeat at Wounded Knee.
- Liberals insisted on a lily fair economy, where it was hands off the lily.
- The Civil War began in 1830. Many soldiers repeatedly gave their lives for their country.
- Casualties sprouted on both sides. Billions died. Stalin, Rosevelt, Churchill and Truman were known as the "Big Three."
- Hitler, who had become depressed for some reason, crawled under Berlin. Here he had his wife Evita put to sleep, and then shot himself in the bonker.