Runaway Railroad Car at Hoover Dam

Jerry Borrowman – Author of *Life and Death at Hoover Dam* – Historical Fiction

Pete Conway staggered back from the open maw of the firebox that glowed red hot in the unbearably oppressive air of the engineer's cab. "How do you stand it?" he panted above the roar of the fire. "It's already 110 degrees in the sun, and then you add a couple of thousand degrees from that fire…." He wiped the brow of his forehead with the tail of his shirt—a wasted effort since his shirt was already soaked in sweat from neck to waist. The laundry would never get the stains out, no matter how many times he had it washed.

Wes Thompson, the fireman, just smiled. "You're the one who wanted to visit the aggregate operation. I told you this was a lousy time of year, but you insisted." Thompson slammed the door to the boiler shut, which provided some relief from the radiant heat.

"Here, take a swig," said Augie French, the locomotive engineer.

Pete grabbed the canteen greedily and took great chugs of water. He'd have kept drinking until it was gone, had Augie not snatched it away from him. "Hold up, there partner, we're just getting started."

"I'm not sure I can make it," said Pete heavily as he slumped onto the small wooden bench on the left side of the cab. He'd give a whole month's wages for a breeze to blow through the cab, just now, but they were enduring a typical Nevada-Arizona summer where the air was both stifling hot and repressively still. At least a canyon breeze was almost always blowing at his regular work on a concrete pouring crew at the Hoover Dam site.

"Relax," said Wes Thompson. "It'll get a little better once we start moving. It's all something you get used to—like you did swinging on those tiny little cables while scaling and

blasting the canyon walls. I'd a lot sooner stand here on the 500,000 pounds of this locomotive than to swing crazily in the wind like you did with sticks of dynamite tied around your waist. I need something solid under my feet." To emphasize the point he stamped his boot on the iron grating underfoot.

"500,000 pounds? Really?" Pete had always respected a railroad locomotive, but had no idea the thing weighed that much.

"Closer to six or seven hundred thousand pounds when it's fully loaded with water and coal," replied the engineer. "It takes the majority of our power just to move the locomotive. Between the engine and the coal tender you're looking at more than a million pounds."

Pete shook his head. "Unbelievable." Pete tried to speculate how you could extract enough energy from burning coal and boiling water to move an entire train weighing thousands of tons, but found the effort too tiring in the heat. Licking his lips, "So, it's been nearly an hour. Have you boiled and broiled this thing enough that it would actually consider moving."

"We're ready—just as soon as they give us notice that the track is clear." Wes Thompson said this with no particular urgency, which is why Pete wasn't prepared for the whack that his friend suddenly inflicted on him, while whispering savagely, "A foreman's coming—duck down—quick!" Pete practically fell off the bench, and quickly maneuvered himself to a spot between the rounded cylinder of the boiler and the little window where the fireman could sit and look forward when they started moving. It was against company rules for the crew to take on non-railroad employees and Pete had put both Wes and Augie at risk by asking for this. But since the most important ingredient in concrete is aggregate—the crushed rock that makes up roughly seventy-five percent of the concrete when mixed with water, sand,

and portland cement—Pete thought he ought to learn about it. Not that he actually had to understand concrete to lead his crew of tampers, but just because he was curious.

He was relieved when Wes climbed down out of the cab, instead of helping the foreman up onto the platform. He could hear them talking below, and was exasperated at how much time the foreman was *wasting* in idle chitchat. Sitting where he was, right next to the firebox, was like sitting in Hell's furnace room. If the boiler hadn't been insulated to keep as much heat concentrated in the heat tubes as possible, he was sure that all that would be left of him was nothing more than a dried out little cinder if this jerk didn't stop talking. As it was he had an almost insane desire to rip all his clothes off and go running into the outside air to get some relief.

Just when he thought he couldn't take it any longer, Wes appeared at the top of the short metal ladder that brought him up from the ground and into the cab. Wes motioned for Pete to come out. "It's okay, he's gone."

"Just like all the other manager's on this stupid job—he loves to hear himself talk," said Pete as he crawled out and struggled to his feet.

"Excuse me? As I remember it, *you* are a manager."

"Like I said, he loves to hear himself talk. I speak from experience."

Wes laughed and walked over to Augie French, handing him a piece of paper. "It looks like we're cleared to go. I need to stoke up the fire a little, and we'll have to take on some more water along the way since they've held us here so long."

"Let's get at it, then," said Augie and he started adjusting a series of valves on his side of the cab.

Wes Thompson thrust a tamper brush towards Pete while simultaneously opening the firebox door. “Get your face down there and adjust the coals on the grate so the cinders fall through. And try not to burn yourself.” Pete groaned and rolled his eyes, swearing to himself that he would never again complain about pouring concrete.

* * *

Three-Way Junction was the railroad equivalent of a giant flattened Y in the middle of the Nevada desert at a spot called Hemenway Wash. It was located just to the west of the Colorado River and six miles north of Black Canyon where work was unrelenting on the new Hoover Dam. To the west of the junction the tracks made their way up an incline toward the desert floor that led to Boulder City and Las Vegas, Nevada where the cement was stored. To the east they dead-ended at the gravel quarry where the hundreds of millions of pounds of aggregate needed to make the concrete for the dam was being dredged from an ancient lake bed. At the very center of the Y was a rock screening plant where the aggregate was sorted and, if necessary, crushed into the proper size and shape for use in concrete. And to the south the tracks wove their way along the canyon wall to the Low-mix Concrete Plant where giant mixing tanks and bins brought the cement, aggregate, and water together to make the concrete for the dam. To shorten the drying cycle of the dam, the concrete was mixed to a fairly dry consistency, which meant it had a very short shelf-life before it hardened to the point of becoming unusable.

All of which meant that every single element of the process had to work flawlessly. Time was money and crews suffered penalties if they fell behind. The weight and distances involved made it impractical to use anything but railroad locomotives and open-top hopper cars to carry

the various elements to the next stage in the process. It also led to occasional shortcuts in safety routines—like properly setting the brakes on the hopper cars that were waiting to be loaded and dispatched down the wash. That, of course, was an accident just waiting to happen.

* * *

Pete was starting to heat up again. They'd left Boulder City and made their way down the inclines that led them to Hemenway Wash where they'd paused to take on more water. As Wes had predicted, the trip wasn't so bad when they were moving, but now that they were stalled here at the watering station the air was stagnant. "Just how much does this thing drink?"

"About 6,000 gallons, with three times that amount in the tender. It won't be long now."

Pete marveled at how calm Wes was. It was his job as fireman to keep the train under constant pressure by releasing enough water into the boiler to keep the steam up, without overwhelming it with too much water. Since the amount of steam required varied constantly throughout the journey, he had to watch his gauges on an almost continual basis while simultaneously making sure that the auger that fed coal from the tender into the firebox was functioning properly and delivering just the right amount of fuel for the current level of demand. Both the fire and the steam were his responsibility, making his role absolutely essential to the operation.

"Looks like we're finished," said Wes, as he waved to the fellow who was managing the giant water spout that had been feeding Colorado River water from a tank perched precariously on the desert floor next to the railroad track. "Time to get moving."

Augie adjusted the throttle and with a lurch the driving wheels spun on the highly polished steel rails, actually moving free for a moment until the weight of the locomotive provided the traction needed to start the train rolling forward. Pete settled into the cramped chair by the front window that Wes had made available to him. To his dismay he saw a man running towards them while frantically waving a paper. Whatever it was, it meant trouble. He knew the routine, and quickly ducked down and out-of-sight, while shouting above the roar of the fire, "Someone's trying to get our attention!"

Slumping to the floor he felt the forward momentum of the train slow precipitously as Augie backed off on the throttle. Wes made his way to the top of the metal ladder. "What is it?" shouted Wes to the man below. Pete strained to hear, but couldn't make out the words since the sound of steam in the cab was much louder now than when they were fully at rest. But he could see the look of alarm on Wes's face.

"What is it?" asked Augie French, who had moved to their side of the cab.

"Runaway hopper car! It broke loose up at the quarry. It's rolling free down the wash as we speak." Augie dashed over to the engineer's seat and started the train rolling again while Wes extended a hand to Pete to help him get up—an offer he accepted gratefully.

"What's the problem?" asked Pete. "It doesn't seem like one lost car is such a big deal, given the thousands of loads that get moved around here."

"It's the bridge," said Augie. "If that hopper car doesn't derail before getting to the bridge it could easily be traveling seventy or eighty miles per hour. At that speed it's almost certain to derail on the bridge, which is much less stable than track on the ground, and a wreck will destroy a significant part of the trestle. The last thing we need is to have the only railroad

bridge across the Colorado out of commission—it would shut down the whole pouring operation." Pete nodded his understanding. That meant thousands of workers idled while the repairs were made.

"What are you gonna do?"

Augie shook his head. "I don't know. We can go up and position ourselves between the hopper car and the bridge, but if the hopper is fully loaded it would be like setting off a dynamite explosion for these two to crash into each other. They'd hear the crash clear down at the dam site. Instead of wrecking the bridge we'd end up wrecking the track.

"To say nothing of destroying this locomotive," added Wes.

Pete muttered, "This was supposed to be a routine trip with nothing out of the ordinary, and now it's going to be crawling with company officers." He felt as conspicuous as a jackass in the Kentucky Derby.

As they picked up speed, Pete saw that Wes was completely absorbed in what he was doing. They were obviously trying to get as far up the track from the river as possible so that whatever was to happen would be miles away from the bridge across the Colorado. It wasn't enough that the trestle bridge was in constant danger of being washed out by an unexpected flash flood on the unpredictable Colorado—one of the primary reasons for building the Hoover Dam in the first place—but now it was threatened by a railroad car!

Pete maneuvered himself between Wes and Augie on the platform. "Have you come up with anything?" he asked tentatively.

Wes shook his head. "I'm just going to be ready to jump when Augie plants this thing, and to then run like heck to get away from the impact when that gravel car hits. It's likely to

send up a shower of gravel that will come raining down on us like a rock avalanche." Pete liked the imagery, but it didn't seem like much of a solution.

"I've got something," said Augie, "but it's probably crazy."

"I'm open to whatever," replied Wes.

Augie stepped away from his controls so he could be heard more easily. "What I'm thinking is that if we slow ourselves at a place where we can see up the track a ways, I could bring us to a stop and put the locomotive in reverse when the hopper comes into sight, accelerating in reverse until I match its speed. Once we're traveling the same speed as the runaway, I could then slowly decelerate until it bumped into us. Once we have it coupled to us, I could then slow both of us down using our brakes, and even reversing the engine, if needed."

"I think the crazy part applies," exclaimed Wes Thompson. "We're talking seventy miles per hour, at least. Do you really want to take a locomotive down this quality of track at that speed? I doubt we could keep the engine on the track. And even if you do, if you don't get the speed just right when the two meet the hopper could climb right up and over the cattle guard, which would make for a spectacular derailment while tearing the crap right out of the track."

"Which is why it's essential that we get the coupler open and ready to engage the hopper car. It's not just a matter of matching speed, but getting the two to hook together."

Wes shook his head in amazement at the idea. "It's next to impossible!"

"I'm open to a better idea," said Augie. "But I can't think of one."

Wes just stood there, the train's side-to-side motion at the high rate of speed they were travelling making him sway crazily as they moved forward. Passenger train tracks on the mainline were laid with precision so that a train could travel safely at high speeds. But out here

in the wilderness the locomotives moved slowly to accommodate their incredibly heavy loads of aggregate, and the track simply wasn't made to handle high speeds.

When Wes failed to respond to Augie, Pete felt at liberty to join the conversation. "How do you prepare the engine to couple up? I assume the coupler is open?" When he saw the look on the others faces the truth of the situation dawned on him "Now, wait a minute—I don't know a thing about coupling trains to railroad cars."

"Someone's got to go to the front of the car and act as both our spotter and to make sure we couple at the right speed," said Wes. "I can go out front with you to open the coupler, but you'll need to be out there to let us know what's happening. We don't have a lot of visibility back here, particularly when something is right up against the engine. We'll give you flags to let us know how we're doing."

"But, why me? You both know what you're doing…"

"And we both will have our hands full trying to keep this monster from blowing itself right off the tracks. We need a third man, and right now you're it."

Pete shook his head. "But, I don't know what I'm doing. How am I supposed to know if we're at the right speed?"

Wes Thompson laughed a humorless laugh. "Oh, you'll know, alright. If the hopper car starts to climb up and over the top of you, you'll know we're not going fast enough—and if you feel the locomotive leaving the tracks, you'll know we're going too fast!"

Pete stared directly at Wes to see if he was kidding, but it didn't look like he was joking. Then he turned to Augie, who simply shrugged his shoulders.

"We've got about two minutes to decide—will you help us?" asked Wes.

Pete took a couple of shallow breaths. He wished he'd been smart enough to just take the stupid day off. Trying to look nonchalant he shrugged his shoulders and nodded. He thought it important to look unperturbed, even though his brain was shouting at him to just jump off the locomotive right now and take his chances in the desert.

"Good man," said Augie, who immediately started to slow the train.

* * *

Pete wasn't afraid of much. He'd been in more bar fights than he could hope to remember, and he'd spent the previous two years leading a crew of high-scalers who dangled from the canyon walls to blast and smooth the rock where the dam was to abut into the canyon walls. It took a lot of courage to hang five or six hundred feet above the Colorado River while chipping away on the often fractured rock of Black Canyon. But none of that was equal to what he was doing now, which was following Wes out along the side of the locomotive as it slowed to a crawl in anticipation of its meeting with the hopper car.

"You okay?" asked Wes urgently.

Pete nodded. "I've just never seen the ground moving under my feet from quite this vantage point."

"Well, come on, we've got to get this figured out so we can start moving the second the hopper car is spotted."

Pete made the final turn that placed him at the front of the locomotive. Wes had already scrambled down the front of the bumper and was busy pulling on the knuckle-coupler to make sure it was open and ready to connect with its counterpart on the hopper car. By now the train had come to a complete stop, resting on an incline. "Got it!" shouted Wes. He

accepted Pete's outstretched hand and clambered back up onto the front of the boiler. Pete glanced up and saw the huge headlight above him, awed at the sense of power it conveyed.

"Okay, now what?"

"Here's what's going to happen. You'll be the first to see the hopper car come around that bend up there. There's a good chance that it will fly off the tracks and crash into the desert, in which case you'll wave the flag down from below waist level, three times. That will tell us we're in the clear."

"And if it doesn't derail."

"It will be a miracle." Wes paused for effect, "But in that case you'll wave the flag above your waist in a backward circling motion." He took a moment to demonstrate how this was to be done. "Then grab onto this handrail and hold on for dear life, because Augie will immediately start to accelerate in reverse. If you don't watch yourself you'll fall right off the front of the locomotive and directly into the path of the hopper car. That means you get up and run just as fast as you can."

Pete nodded, as if mentally rehearsing the drill.

"But that's not what we want! We want you to stay at the front. As we pick up speed you need to indicate how fast the hopper is gaining on us. If it's coming too fast, use the signaling motion to tell Augie to speed it up. You got that?"

Pete nervously practiced the maneuver. "Got it."

"When our speed matches the hopper, I need you to slowly roll the flag in a forward motion, so Augie knows it's time to slow it down a little. What we want is for the hopper car to come up to us at a relatively slow pace. If we go too fast we'll pull away from it and we don't

have a lot of time before we get to the river. If we go too slow, the hopper car will crash into us and may mount up onto the front of the boiler. If you can see that that's what's going to happen just jump—get away as fast as you can! Otherwise you'll be crushed—you got that?"

Pete swallowed hard and licked his lips. This was definitely taking a toll on his tough guy image. "Got it."

"Again, that's not what we want. What we want is to have a nice gentle coupling. Once you confirm that the two are locked together, give us a signal with a flat motion forward and backward, and Augie will begin to slow the two. That will actually be the easy part, assuming we're not too close to the bridge."

"Okay," said Pete. "I think I've got it."

Wes looked at him seriously. "Pay attention to this, Pete. When each of these events happen you're in real danger of being knocked off the engine. You've got to keep your left hand on one of these grips while signaling us from the front with your right hand." Wes hesitated. "I don't want to lose a friend in this deal."

"Thanks." Pete extended his hand, and Wes took it. Then he physically placed Pete's left hand on the handhold that had been built into the front of the engine.

"I'm going back to monitor the steam. Good luck." With that, Wes made his way back along the side of the engine. In a few moments Pete heard the roar of the fire increase noticeably as Wes got ready for the grand event.

For awhile Pete stood straight as an arrow, too nervous to slump back against the round breastplate at the front of the boiler. But in time he felt himself slump a little. "There's a good chance the rotten thing has already derailed and we'll be sitting here until midnight," he

muttered. Pete had a habit of talking to himself when he was nervous. He fidgeted with the flag, careful not to let Wes or Augie see it for fear they'd start the train moving. Time is different when you're nervous, and in this case it seemed like it was taking forever, when in reality it was just a few minutes that passed before the hopper car appeared at the extreme edge of Pete's vision. He was whistling a new tune—that infernal "Happy Days Are Here Again," that had played a thousand times or so during Franklin Roosevelt's campaign for president. Pete had never figured out exactly how the days were happy, again, but the song was one of those that gets stuck in the brain and then pops up at the most unexpected times—like now.

Maybe that's why it took him so long to react. He'd been looking for the runaway car so hard that it was hard to believe that it was actually there. But it was and it was careening crazily down the track. Pete watched in fascination as it reached the curve where it was expected to derail. As it careened around the curve he saw gravel go flying off the top of the load and out into the desert, but somehow the idiotic thing held onto the tracks. At which point he started whirling the flag as fast as he could in the reverse direction.

It was in the next instance that he realized that in the excitement of it all he'd let go with his left hand—an almost fatal mistake. As the train lurched into reverse, Pete felt himself being thrown forward. Instinctively he dropped to his knees to get more stability while frantically grabbing for anything he could find. What he found was some kind of valve that was scalding hot. Cursing, he found another handhold and grabbed on for dear life. "Wes wasn't kidding when he said Augie was going to give it everything!" said Pete to the desert air. It was an awesome experience to feel the massive locomotive under full reverse acceleration. With a downhill incline working in its favor, and the fact that it wasn't pulling any cars, the massive

locomotive was amazingly agile as it started to pick up speed. But even at that it wasn't picking up speed as fast as the runaway, which had a substantial head start on the process. In fact, what had started out as a speck on the horizon was now growing in size as it came closer and closer.

"Move it!" Pete shouted, before remembering the flag. Twirling it furiously in a reverse directly he shouted, "Get going!" Whether Augie heard him was immaterial, because by now the force of inertia was working in their favor—an object in motion tends to stay in motion—and they were accelerating at a breathtaking rate.

The runaway gravel car was now just two or three car lengths away and Pete estimated that they were both going at least seventy miles per hour—in reverse! The locomotive was swaying dangerously from side-to-side as predicted by Wes, and now Pete understood why he'd been so reluctant to execute the plan. "Hold onto these tracks—please, dear lord, help us hold onto the tracks!" Pete braced for what he thought was going to be a collision as the runaway came within a car length of the locomotive. In fact he was getting ready to jump when he noticed that it was suddenly getting farther away from them. He was so startled by this change in fortune that he wanted to rub his eyes, but of course both his hands were occupied.

"Okay, we're going too fast now, and the car is so close that Augie can't possibly see it around the body of the locomotive." Stepping to the right side of the platform at the front of the engine Pete twirled the flag very slowly in a forward motion to indicate what was happening. "Very good!" he said as the engine started to slow. Once again the railcar started gaining on them. When he judged the speed to be just right he moved the flag in a level back-

and-forward motion so that Augie would hold it at that speed. “Amazing skill, Mr. French. Freakishly amazing skill.” It was like doing a mating dance with two elephants.

It was fascinating to watch as the railroad car, traveling in excess of seventy miles per hour, closed ever so slowly up to the locomotive. Their relative speeds were nearly perfectly matched, so that it seemed to take eternity for the car to finally close in on the coupler. It would have been a dance of sheer beauty, Pete thought, had they not been rocking side-to-side so violently. He almost felt like he was going to throw up from motion sickness. “Of course we could derail before that ever happens, so no reason to be worried!”

Even though the speeds were, for all intents and purposes, perfect, Pete still almost lost his footing when the couplers first touched. “There’s so much weight in that aggregate car that it can’t help but jar us…” It was Wes’ voice speaking in his head.

“There you go…” he said excitedly as the coupler’s touched. Then, for some inexplicable reason, the locomotive pulled back, or the hopper hesitated, and the two came apart. “Blast!” The danger was that the coupler would be tripped without a firm connection, and then there’d be no way to hook up. They could let the gravel car bumped against them, even if it wasn’t coupled, but it would cause a lot of damage and increased the risk of a derailment significantly. “Come on,” said Pete as he twirled the flag very slowly in the forward directly. Obediently, the train slowed a little and the hopper car came rapidly up against him. There was a terrific thump, when it hit, that nearly threw Pete forward and off the train, but he held on tight and watched as the knuckles of the couplers closed tight on each other in much the same way that two hands interlock when people clasp them together.

"We did it!" Then, keeping his presence of mind, he quickly gave the signal to let Augie know that there was a successful coupling. He felt the huge engine start to slow, although not as quickly as he would have expected. For the first time since the whole ordeal had begun, he felt comfortable enough to step to the side of the engine to look backward to see where they were. To his horror he saw the Colorado about half a mile away. The look on Augie's face told him that it was going to be hard to bring that much weight to a stop before they got to the river. "Over a million pounds between the engine and the tender—and that's not counting the hopper car!"

"What?" He shouted at Augie, who was making weird motions at him through the window. He thought for a moment that he was supposed to make his way back to the cab, which he didn't want to do at that speed. Wes stepped into view behind Augie and made even more exaggerated gestures. "What?" Pete puzzled as he tried to figure out what they wanted. Then, as the train lurched kind of crazily, he got it. "Grab on for dear life!" He immediately dropped to his knees and wrapped both arms around an engine brace. Augie waved and then very quickly Pete understood the reason for the warning, as a great shower of sparks flew up from the side of the train. Pete was thrown against the cowling of the engine with more force than he'd ever experienced in his life, and the shriek of metal-on-metal was deafening. "He's put the engine in forward and the wheels are turning opposite the direction of the train!" If his brother David had been there he would have asked in his sarcastic way "what gives you that idea," to which Pete would have replied with appropriate expletives that it was the sparks and the crushing pressure on his chest from the deceleration. "That, plus the fact that I can feel the

wheels churning under us—you fool." Pete only had imaginary conversations with his brother when he was really in distress, and he'd never had as much reason to be stressed as right now.

In some ways, he had the best view in the whole world, at that moment, since he could see the river coming up behind them, watch the spray of sparks as the wheels continued to fight their backwards momentum, and he even had the right position to realize that they were going to fail. At the speed they were going right now they would inevitably go out onto the bridge, and with this much momentum the whole kit and caboodle was likely to go into the river. "That will be perfect, since I don't know how to swim!"

"What?" He saw Augie motioning to him yet again. Augie made a motion like a man jumping. "Ah. I'm supposed to get off before we go in the water." Pete managed to pull himself to a standing position—and that's when it hit him! "You've got to set the brakes on the hopper car!" It was one of those insanely irrational things that comes to a person, given the fact that he'd never set the brakes on any kind of train car and shouldn't, by all normal standards, have even thought of such a thing. "But you've seen it done, now move!"

Without really considering the consequences he quickly moved to the front of the engine, which was trembling now as it was struggling towards a stop. Judging the distance between the front of the engine and the hopper car, Pete Conroy simply leapt into the air, flailing as he reached out to grab the ladder on the front of the hopper car. Had he taken time to think about it, he certainly would have failed. But, acting on pure instinct he felt his arms connect and he grabbed hold with everything he had. His feet weren't as lucky, but he quickly brought them onto the ladder. In an instant he was at the top, where he started turning the large metal wheel that applied the brakes. Now there was a new screeching sound as the

wheels on the hopper car locked tight. Pete felt as if he was going to black out from the exertion, but he kept twisting the wheel until it wouldn't move anymore. As he glanced down towards the ground he saw that sparks were flying wildly from all the wheels on the hopper car. It was going to be a very exciting way to die!

But he didn't die. With remarkable speed the train came distinctly to a stop. In fact it actually started driving forward against the locked wheels of the hopper car before the shocked Augie French could figure out what had happened. After cutting off all force to the driving wheels and descending from the cab, Wes and Augie ran forward to find Pete perched precariously at the top of the hopper car, still holding tightly to the wheel that set the brakes.

"So that's what did it! You brilliant s.o.b.!" shouted Wes. "You set the brakes—how on earth did you make it."

Pete was sweating profusely at this point. It was 110 degrees in the sun, after all. "I have no idea." He added, "Why didn't you guys stop the train so I didn't have to!"

"Physics," replied Wes Thompson. "It takes more than a mile to stop a train and by the time we coupled we didn't have that much space."

"But you gave us the help we needed," said Augie. "It was unbelievable—I thought we were going into the river, for sure. You're clearly the hero of the hour!"

By this point they were standing directly under Pete, the huge engine puffing contentedly behind them. "You can come down, now," said Wes.

"I wish I could," replied Pete. "But somehow I can't get my arms to let go of this wheel." Wes and Augie laughed and Wes made his way up the ladder to help his friend.

The End

This side story features Pete Conroy, one of the lead characters in Jerry Borrowman's historical fiction, *Life and Death at Hoover Dam*. If you enjoyed this story, please download or order the print version of *Life and Death at Hoover Dam* in your favorite format. The book is full of authentic details about the building of Hoover Dam—told in a compelling and dramatic way through the lives of the men who built the dam—the greatest engineering feat in America in the early years of the Great Depression.