

The Silver Bridge Tragedy

By

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Rush hour struck the Silver Bridge on December 15, 1967. Ten days before Christmas the bridge collapsed causing a catastrophe among the West Virginia-Ohio border. Many suspicions were made on what exactly happened. Some believed the bridge collapsed due to the “sonic boom.” Older residents blamed the collapse on the “Curse of Chief Cornstalk.” On the other hand, others blamed the “Mothman.”

The sonic boom was suggested by some people. Several people claimed they heard a “sonic boom” around the time the Silver Bridge collapsed. Local officials questioned this theory and researched it with the military. The military claimed no aircraft had flown over the area; in addition, if a “sonic boom” had occurred the homes and buildings around the Point Pleasant-Kanagua area would have been destroyed as well. After conducting further information the “sonic boom” was ruled out as a cause.

Legend has it that in 1774 there was a battle between white men and Indians. Chief Cornstalk, the leader of the Indians, gave his troops a choice between fighting till death or surrender. His men choice to surrender and Chief Cornstalk was forced to sign the Treaty of Camp Charlotte. Soon after his defeat, the chief was captured and murdered. According to the prodigy, Chief Cornstalk’s last words were a curse which he placed death and devastation on the entire Point Pleasant area; however, after a comprehensive investigation the curse was also ruled out.

One of the most famous accusations was the presence of the “Mothman.” The mothman was supposedly seen around Charleston-Point Pleasant area in the 1960’s. He is rumored to be a creature around six to seven feet tall resembling a man’s body; yet, he has large red eyes and moth-like wings on his back. Furthermore, the viewings of the mothman are believed to be linked to the disturbance of Chief Cornstalk’s grave when the county courthouse was expanded. Many hypotheses have been made about sightings of the mothman; nonetheless, none of these assumptions have been able to be proven. Investigators determined the mothman had nothing to do with the collapse of the Silver Bridge.

With speculations, myths, and legends surrounding one of the most devastating events to happen to the state of West Virginia or Ohio,

investigators felt pressure to determine the truth behind the collapse of the Silver Bridge. After meticulous examinations of the bridge, the collapse was found to be due because of a crack in eye-bar 330. The crack occurred due to too much stress being placed on it and was approximately 0.1 inches deep when the bridge collapsed. When the eye-bar cracked the load was transferred to the other side of the eye-bar causing the bridge to collapse. One witness that was standing around the bridge at the time of the cave in said the bridge took only about one minute to completely fall.

So who's to blame for the loss of 46 deaths and 9 injuries: no one surprisingly. Although there were bridge inspections at the time the crack in eye-bar 330 would not have been detected: the bridge would have had to be disassembled in order to observe the crack and there was no technology at the time for examining the bridges eye-bars that carefully.

Not only was this a devastation for citizens in the West Virginia-Ohio area but it was also effected the nation. President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered an inspection on all bridges to determine there safety. Any bridge that was built in the last forty years had to have a thorough inspection to determine its security.

The collapse of the bridge and the loss of almost 50 lives was a tragedy; however, it is noted that there are positive aspects to the collapse of the Silver Bridge. The federal government mandated the National Bridge Inspection Standards. The NBIS states there should be periodical inspections of bridges. Engineers also are more aware of corrosion and fatigue of bridges. This permits the building of safer more efficient bridges. Also, technology has improved allowing bridges to be checked more extensively.