



Kent Historical Society Newsletter

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Who Saved Otto Klug? *Investigating a 75-year-old mystery*

By Peter M. Heimlich

So-called “alternative facts” are nothing new. Here’s an intriguing example tied to a dramatic, high-profile event that happened about 75 years ago in Litchfield County.

It starts with an August 29, 1941 front page *New York Times* article, “Children Escape in Train Wreck; 2 of Crew Killed,” about a massive train wreck in Kent. Six cars carrying hundreds of campers derailed into Hatch Pond. Two trainmen were killed and a third had a leg amputated.

The article concluded with information provided by “Henry Heimlich, 21, of 30 West Ninetieth Street, a sailing counselor at Camp Mah-kee-nac and a pre-medical student at Cornell University, who was... the ‘hero’ of the accident.”

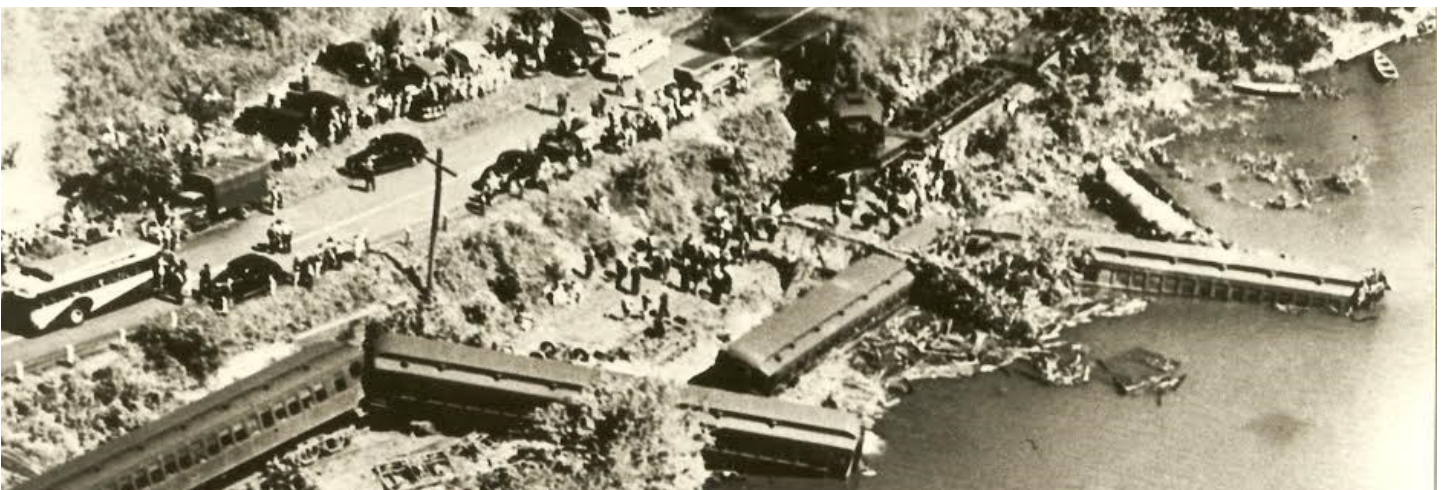
“I was riding in the next-to-the-last coach,” Heimlich related, “when suddenly there was a lurch...I ran forward and jumped

out. I saw that the engine and the first car were almost submerged and that the fireman’s leg was caught under the steps of the second car which had overturned. He was lying in about four feet of water.

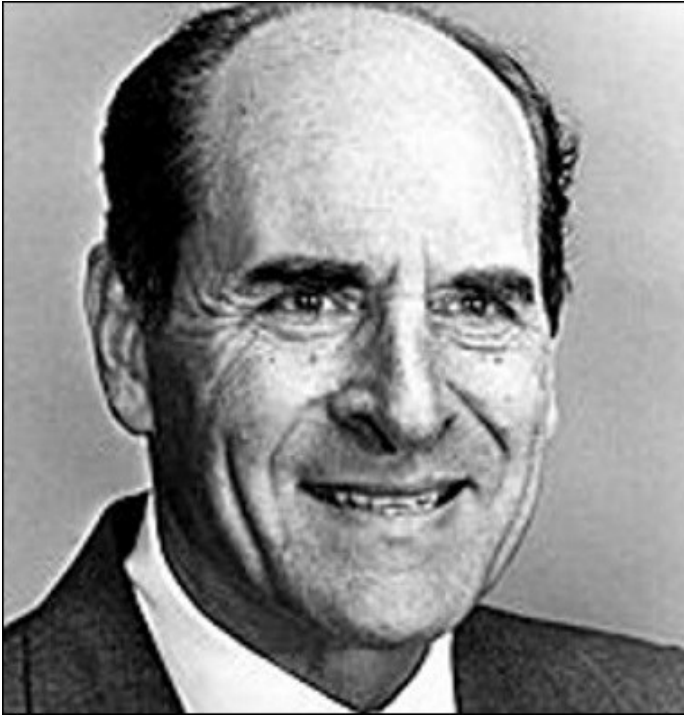
“He was floundering around, hysterical, and I ran toward him and held his head above the water...”

“He was all black and he was crying that he was afraid he’d lose his leg. Another counselor, Jack Handelsman, who is also a pre-medical student jumped into a boat nearby and rowed out to help me. Then a lot of people came and while I held the fireman up they started digging underneath with their hands, and later with shovels, to free his leg.”

A few months later, the *Times* published a follow-up item with a photo of the handsome 21-year-old pre-med student receiving an award for bravely saving the life of the train fireman.



The Hatch Pond trainwreck of 1941. Our guest author, Peter M. Heimlich, has been called an “investigative blogger,” and does original reporting on his blog, The Sidebar. He lives in suburban Atlanta with his wife, Karen M. Shulman.



Dr. Henry Heimlich, from Peter Heimlich's files: A fabulator's career started in South Kent.

The sailing counselor and apparent hero was my father, Henry J. Heimlich MD, who died a couple of months ago. If the name rings a bell, it's probably because of a choking rescue treatment he first called "the Heimlich method" in the June 1974 medical journal *Emergency Medicine*. Only two years later, what had been renamed "the Heimlich maneuver" was incorporated into national first aid guidelines. Since then my family name became a household word and my father's namesake treatment has been credited with saving the lives of thousands of choking victims.

Fast forward to Spring 2002 when my wife Karen and I began researching my father's career. To our astonishment, we uncovered an unseen history of fraud that revealed him to be a remarkable charlatan and serial liar. Most shocking, he'd used nonexistent or fraudulent data in order to promote a string of crackpot medical claims that resulted in serious injuries and deaths.

In order to prevent more harm, we decided to bring the information to public attention via the press.

Since 2003, our work has been the basis for a couple hundred mainstream media reports that exposed what one medical journal called my father's "overreach and quackery."

My dad was no slouch when it came to singing his own praises to anyone in earshot and I was no exception. Most of our time together consisted of him telling me about his achievements and awards, especially after he became famous.

And that was my first problem with the train wreck story – over the decades he never mentioned it to me. I only learned about it in the early months of our research when Karen and I happened upon the 1941 *New York Times* articles.

My interest was piqued, so about 14 years ago, I decided to take a closer look.

Via public libraries in Connecticut, I obtained copies of every article I could find about the headline-making disaster. I also contacted Marge Smith at the Kent Historical Society who sent me some paperwork from their files and put me in touch with Emily Krizan, whose husband, Joseph Krizan Jr., reportedly participated in rescue efforts at the train wreck, including helping the trapped fireman, whose name was Otto Klug.

Interestingly, none of the articles and none of the people with whom I communicated said anything about any camp counselor (or my father by name) being involved in the rescue.

Instead, they near-unanimously identified a local resident named Jack Bartovic as the person responsible for holding Klug's head above water for hours. Local residents Charles Dutcher Edwards and Philip Camp were also identified as participants in the rescue.

The most compelling telling was a lengthy August 29, 1941 *Waterbury Republican* article consisting of detailed interviews with Bartovic and Emily's husband:

"Joseph Krizan, Jr., had seen the locomotive and cars topple off the track into Hatch Pond at South Kent yesterday as he was mowing the grass in front of his mother's house, just off the South Kent Road.

He and a friend, Jack Bartovic, ran toward the accident as fast as they could...Krizan was the first person to reach the scene. Bartovic didn't get into the car, because he saw a man half in and half out of the water, a short distance away at the other end of the car. It was the fireman, Otto Klug, of Seymour.

Bartovic waded in and held Klug's head above water, for his leg was caught. Later they found it had been almost severed and a doctor wanted to cut it off and get Klug out of there, but Klug said, "My leg isn't bad. I won't let you cut it off. I'll wait until the crane gets here and they lift the car off me."

So Bartovic stayed with him for more than two hours, and the crane lifted the car and then Klug saw that his leg was hanging only by flesh.

Krizan and Bartovic told their stories as they watched the wrecking crew working on the derailed trains in the late afternoon sunlight that slated off the green quiet hills.

In a March 25, 2003 e-mail, Marge Smith wrote me: "Emily Krizan stopped by here today with some thoughts for me to pass along to you... (She got into a discussion) with Marge [Edwards] Richards, who is sure that her husband was the one to hold up Klug's head. But we feel positive that several people had that task, as the poor man was in the water for many hours. Emily and her husband had a dear friend named Jack Bartovic (no longer alive), who also held up Klug's head. Many years later, Klug knocked on Jack's door and came in to thank him for helping to save his life. Jack said he remembered Klug begging them to save his leg because he could feel it."

At the time I also interviewed Jacob "Jack" Handelsman – the camp counselor my father told the *Times* reporter had "rowed out to help me." Dr. Handelsman, then a prominent surgeon at Johns Hopkins, vividly recalled how he and my father safely escorted the young campers off the train to the road adjacent



Rescuers at Hatch Pond, from the KHS archives.

to the tracks. However, he'd never heard anything about my father being involved in Klug's rescue and didn't remember anything about a rowboat. When I asked him about the bravery award given to my father, he expressed surprise because they'd remained friends and my dad had never told him about it.

My father's 2014 memoir recounted the Hatch Pond train wreck in which he portrayed himself as a lone hero who had "been in the water (with Klug) for two hours" until "police and medical personnel finally arrived." More recently, his obituary in the December 19 *Wall Street Journal* repeated the 1941 *New York Times* version about how my father "held up the head of one of the train workers until help was able to arrive."

In the course of corresponding with the *Journal* about the apparent roles of Jack Bartovic and other area residents, I again reached out to the Kent Historical Society. That resulted in a gracious invitation to write this article which I hope generates more information from readers. To get the ball rolling, I composed and uploaded this page to my website that includes all articles and related information I've obtained:
<http://medfraud.info/OttoKlug.html> ...

Do you have more documents and/or information to share? If so, please contact me and/or the Kent Historical Society.