

'We Are in a Beautiful Deep Freeze'—  
'There's No Heat...Gas Is Filtering Through The Cars'

Louis R. (Joe) Pitts, 45, manager of the Rial Bros. Glass Co., Oakland, Cal., was one of the passengers on the stranded City of San Francisco. Shortly after the three-day ordeal of awaiting rescue began, he started a letter to his wife, Helen, providing a chronological account of events aboard the train. The following are excerpts from that letter.

ABOARD THE STREAM-LINER CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO. SNOW-BOUND IN DONNER SUMMIT PASS, Jan. 15, 1:30 p. m.—

My Dear Helen:  
... We arrived a few miles east of this spot at 3:30 a. m. Sunday, the 13th. We first ran into real rough going at Norden. Now, of course, everyone realizes the mistake of not staying there, but the train crew felt they could get through. Snow was deep and a very heavy fall added to it constantly.

The train finally came to a halt approximately 13 miles west of Norden and between Yuba Pass and Crystal Lake. The train stopped purely due to lack of power to push any further quantity of snow ahead of it. And in addition the snow became so firmly packed under the train that further progress was impossible.

The storm continued fiercely all day Sunday. Snow plows had been constantly working in this area, and one of the big rotary made contact with us... at approximately 5:30 p. m.

THE ROTARY snow plow, plus the diesels on the train made numerous efforts to move the train in either direction, but no movement was possible, either forward or backward—we were locked fast—snow underneath the train.

Monday morning, the 14th—A section crew of 35 arrived. Their purpose was to manually clear snow around the diesels to keep them free. However, it was obvious after several hours that it was hopeless.

By late Monday things were looking bad. The storm continued in intensity. A committee of civilians has been appointed.

(Pitts wrote that the committee held a conference.)

In the conference it was advised that everyone leave the train and walk one mile to Crystal Lake where we understand there is shelter, heat and water. We voted the suggestion down for it is obvious less than half of this group could make such a trek in this storm.

We did appoint a representative, a New Englander (Peter Wood, 32, Marblehead, Mass.), to go to Crystal Lake and phone for assistance.

(Mr. Wood bucked the snow in a blizzard and got the first call out, and got a hero's rating with the passengers for that and three subsequent trips. Mr. Pitts wrote later in the letter.)

MONDAY NIGHT—rumors are a dime a dozen—the Sixth Army is on the way in, dog sleds are en route from Reno, P&E (utility company) have snowcats on the way in SP has equipment coming in from Truckee, and many more too numerous to mention. (Actually all these efforts were being made or in the process at the time.)

Fortunately, the passenger list has a sprinkling of individuals that have know-how. H. S. Loynd, president of Parke-Davis Co. (Detroit, Mich.), M. S. Lester, general manager Cadillac (Motors) of San Francisco; R. Harvey, director of Heavy Equipment Co., Detroit; Mulvaney, H. S. Y. Electrical Equipment, Detroit and many, many more. Fortunately Walter Roehll, M. D., Middletown, O., has taken over the health problem.



TUCKERED OUT—Dr. W. H. Roehll of Middletown, Ohio, is shown with his wife as they arrived at Oakland, Cal., after they took care of the passengers stranded aboard the snowbound streamliner, City of San Francisco, for three days in the High Sierras. He was hailed as a hero. Mrs. Roehll nursed his patients.

The poor guy really has a problem on his hands and what a wonderful job he is doing. Moved all the sick to three after cars... women and babies moved out of coaches into bedrooms. There are gentlemen left, that I assure you. You only have to be here to see proof. This Monday night my bedroom is stripped—the same (may be) said for many more who gave blankets, etc., for needy.

THE UNSUNG heroes—the Mexican crew—exhausted. Ice coated hands shoveling to keep cars clear of becoming completely covered. You see them sleeping standing up...

The steam is gone and we are in a beautiful deep freeze. Something nice happened this late Monday—a young chap, R. D. Spence, trainmaster, has arrived from Sacramento. He has taken over. He is realistic—knows what he is doing and immediately everyone has a feeling of relief.

Two boys from Donner Summit Pass have arrived in a snow weasel—food and encouraging information. That is, someone knows where we are and what the conditions are... I gave one of the chaps some money to phone you to let you know we are okay. We have just had a radio report—electricity seems to have come to life for a few moments in the club car. We hear of the hard rains and winds down there in Bay Area... believe me, we are disappointed when we hear nothing of the plight of this train. We feel we have been let down, but of course we know better.

LESTER has given his apartment to some railroad workers. He is bunking with me—we have nothing but the mattresses

and of course no sleep is possible. Midnight, and it seems something else has injected itself in the picture—many people in our last three cars are ill—gas from equipment underneath the train cannot escape. It filters in through the cars... workmen break some of the windows to get air circulating—no heat inside, anyway, so what's the difference. We must leave our doors open and some-one checks about every 15 minutes...

... Things are quite messy—even dirty—the coach cars are almost unbearable—really stench. The steward, Mr. T. E. Tschumi (San Francisco), is a prince. He promises us pleasant under glass for dinner... at 5:30 Mr. Tschumi calls us for dinner (which)... turned out to be mock pheasant—hot dogs and spaghetti.

IT IS NOW 9:30 p. m. Tuesday. Dr. (Lawrence) Nelson, the young SP doctor has just arrived from Truckee. It took him snow plow, weasel, dog team and snow shoes to get here... There is fairly close to us now 21 pieces of army equipment. The progress is exceedingly slow but they expect to get here by a. m. and start taking passengers out... (Mr. Pitts then describes his efforts at trying to sleep by wrapping his feet in a wool sport shirt and a sport jacket after putting on three pairs of wool socks. Just as he is settled there is a commotion in the next compartment and he gets up to see what it is.)

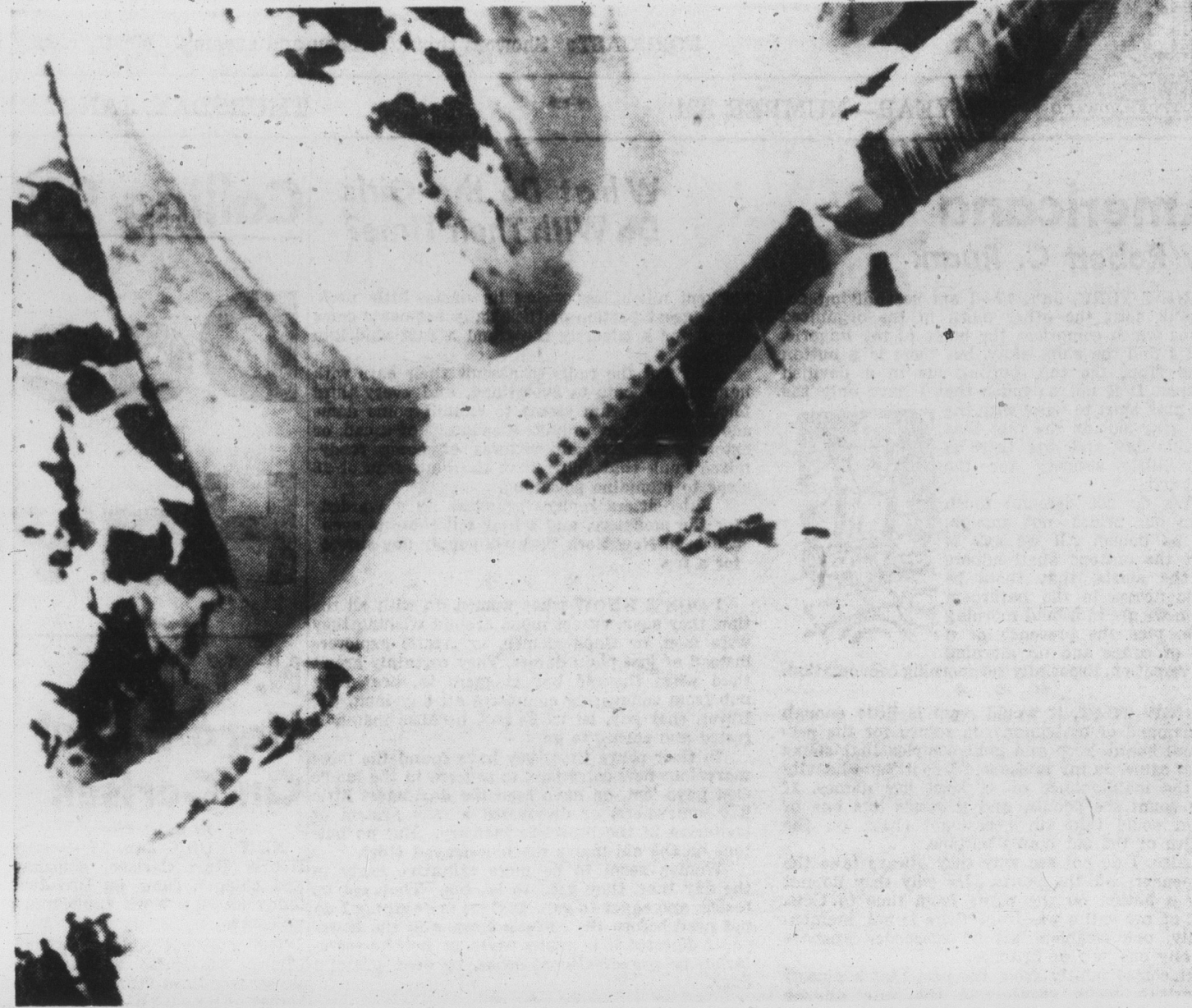
... They have just broken into the compartment of Mr. and Mrs. James Hurley, president of the W. H. Anderson Co. (Detroit), a wonderful couple on their way to Honolulu. Both are on the floor in a coma. More gas... no more rooms to be locked and instructions to have all doors ajar...

This is Wednesday a. m.—6:30. Thank goodness the storm is over, just light snow. I smell bad, so regardless of ice, I collect a one-half urn of water strip down and with hotel soap, clean up. Don't let anyone tell me that water can be below freezing and still be water...

... THINGS are a jumble. People still lying all over the place... During coffee, Dr. Nelson and Spence come in from below with good news. They said we will definitely get out today.

Now we have a flurry of excitement—it is a Coast Guard helicopter. It is now 10:45 a. m... This same Mexican gang is now walking through the snow with sacks of coal on their shoulders—they have been up all night. Some look frozen. Others look like they are walking in their sleep.

Some men are now coming up the track with stretchers. That looks good... now things are pretty much bedlam. We get our first instructions regarding leaving train, etc. (Mr. Pitts ended his letter at that point.)



SNOWED UNDER—Aerial view shows the streamliner City of San Francisco snowbound at Emigrant Gap, Cal. Rescue teams reached the train yesterday and removed the passengers after they had been marooned since Sunday.

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