

# George Mills



## One-Armed Bandits

And Other Stories of  
Iowa's Past and Present

## Eight Children and a Train

It began as an ordinary Thursday morning in the lives of Richard and Ruth Hammes and their eight children. Also in the lives of engineer George West and his crew of four on Rock Island diesel train No. 429.

Hammes, 45, got up at 6 a.m. on his 80-acre farm near Sigourney in Keokuk County. He and two small sons did the chores and breakfasted at about seven. The date was October 25, 1956. At Washington, Iowa, some 30 miles to the east, the Rock Island crew ate breakfast about the same time and got the train rolling toward Des Moines.

Hammes went to the field to pick corn.

He would never really see his children alive again.

With no knowledge of what portended, Ruth Hammes flew around the house that morning doing as she usually did mornings. The 38-year-old mother had to see to it that all eight children were fed and gotten ready for the day. The children were Ronnie and Donnie, 9-year-old twins; Karen, 8; Linda, 7; Gary, 6; Rosemary, 3; and Vicky and Ricky, 1-year-old twins.

Ruth had to take the five oldest to the Plank township rural school in time for 9 o'clock classes. She had expected to leave the three little preschoolers at home in the care of her husband. But he was out at work, so she piled all eight of her brood into the 1953 family Plymouth close to 8:40. She drove out north on a dirt-gravel road toward the school a mile away.

The Rock Island train, consisting of an engine and caboose, pulled out of Keota, Iowa, 12 miles to the east, about the time Ruth was loading the kids into the automobile. (The train had brought a string of freight cars to Washington from Des Moines the day before.)

Unknown to each other, the train and the Hammes car both neared the fateful crossing from different directions. The crossing was known to be dangerous because of obscured vision. It was said that "you are almost on the tracks before you see a

## *Eight Children and a Train*

train." The tracks from the east came through a deep cut in hilly ground.

Engineer West said he sounded plenty of warning signals as the train approached the crossing, first the standard two long whistles and a short one, then a long blast a quarter mile east and another 600 feet east. It's doubtful, though, that Ruth Hammes heard anything over the noise of a car full of chattering youngsters.

West was riding on the right side of the engine cab.

Thus, he said, his vision was blocked to the left by the engine itself for the final 200 feet before the crossing, and he didn't see the Hammes car at all. But the fireman of the crew, Corwin Bonta, did see it. He was riding on the left side.

"I would guess," he said, "you had to be within 100 feet of the crossing before the cut tapers down and you can look over the bank to the south." He suddenly realized there was going to be a crash. He yelled, "Spike it! Stop!"

The engineer applied the emergency brake but it was too late. The train hit the automobile broadside and shoved the wreckage and human beings 711 feet down the track. The car was split open and demolished. The engine halted on top of part of the vehicle. The time was 8:53 a.m.

Seven children were killed outright. The eighth, Ronnie, died 90 minutes later in the Sigourney hospital, where he had been taken with his mother. She was not fatally injured but badly bruised and cut and in a state of deep shock.

All the children suffered fractured skulls and two had broken necks. Two bodies were thrown 100 feet west of the crossing. The others were still jammed within the car.

Mrs. Hammes said one of the children had "hollered" before the crash and she slammed on the brakes, but in vain.

Mrs. Paul Webb, a neighbor and a cousin of Hammes, witnessed the tragedy. She was the mother of five children herself and was on her way home from taking her own youngsters to the same school. She had heard the train whistle, and that was how she happened to be looking at the crossing.

"It was terrible," she said.

## *Eight Children and a Train*

West said he got out of the engine after it stopped and looked at the bodies, the train and the car. "I went back to the caboose and sat on the steps," he said. "I was real sick. I was so upset I couldn't do anything. I didn't even know there was a schoolhouse near the crossing."

West, 67, said he never had been involved in an accident before. He had been an engineer seven years and a railroad employee 38 years.

"I am not a church-going man," he said, "but when I put on those brakes I prayed 'please God, isn't this train ever going to stop?'"

Meanwhile the corn picker of Richard Hammes had quit working. He had returned to the house within minutes of Ruth's departure with the kids. "A neighbor lady came and told me there had been an accident," Hammes said. "I didn't think at first it would be real bad. Maybe the car was banged up a little.

"When I got there I saw some of the kids were hurt real bad. I went over to my wife. She was sitting on the ground holding the two young ones." Neither was breathing.

In the next few hours he went through the horrors of seeing his children's bodies extricated from the tangled metal, of Ronnie dying in the hospital, of being with his grief-stricken and injured wife.

He suffered additional agonies when he went home at noon. "It was bad walking into that empty nine-room house," he said. "Always before there would be somebody yelling 'hi Dad!' This time only silence."

Hammes was so distraught Saturday that he almost had to be carried into the church for the joint funeral of his children. The services were at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic church at Clear Creek 12 miles east of Sigourney.

The anguished Ruth Hammes was unable to go to the funeral. She was taken on a stretcher the day before to see her children for the last time in a funeral chapel in Sigourney. She had gotten the idea that the faces had been disfigured in the

## *Eight Children and a Train*

smashup and she wanted to be reassured. Apparently they had not been. She called the children "my babies."

"It was a touching scene," said a friend. "It was pretty rough on her."

The caskets were brought Saturday morning from Sigourney in three hearses to the red brick, tall-spired church, four in one hearse and two each in the other two. Bells were sounded as the caskets were carried by Hammes adult relatives into the church. Thirty-two children served as pall bearers, most from the Clear Creek parochial school but some from their own Plank township rural school.

A sister-in-law, Mrs. Leo Hammes, stayed with the mother, who was kept partly under sedatives, during the funeral hours. More than 1,000 persons attended the Clear Creek services. The eight simple white caskets were lined up side by side in the church. They then were gently borne on foot in a procession to the church cemetery about a block away.

The children were buried side by side in one large grave. Each casket was placed in a separate burial vault.

The entire Sigourney and Keokuk county communities were hit hard by the tragedy. A total of 2,470 persons had visited the chapel in Sigourney Friday.

The Hammes farm was a sadly quiet place after the funeral. It was difficult to realize that eight children had been running around the house two days before. Skippy and Rusty, two little dogs, sunned themselves in the backyard. There was a little dump truck in the sandpile inside an old tractor tire. A child's swing stand seemed strangely out of place in the front yard.

Richard Hammes attained a degree of composure after the funeral and he talked a little about the children. "If even only one or two hadn't been taken, life would have been worth living," he said. "But they're all gone. Our little ones used to meet me at the door and I would have to take them and rock them in the chair. The 3-year-old would meet me at the gate and I would carry her into the house. I miss them pretty bad."

Richard and Ruth were married in 1946. He was a fur and wool buyer as well as farmer. He had been a combat engineer

## *Eight Children and a Train*

in the army in Europe in World War II. He once said he liked large families, that he was one of 14 children himself.

Ruth recovered from her injuries. She gave birth to another son, Myron, on January 15, 1958, some 15 months after the train disaster. Ruth died at 41 in another childbirth in April of 1960 at Sigourney. The child did not survive.

Richard continued farming and fur buying until about 1970. He remarried but the marriage ended in divorce. Sheriff Bud Wallerich said his friend Hammes became despondent.

"I had reports he had been brooding quite a bit over the loss of the children," the sheriff said.

On May 24, 1972, the body of Richard Hammes, 61, was found in the woods along the South Skunk River in Keokuk County. He had killed himself with a single rifle shot to the head. Myron, 14, was all that was left of the family. He went to live with relatives.

The deaths of the eight children in 1956 was the greatest single tragedy ever suffered by one Iowa family.

# Iowa's master storyteller at the top of his form

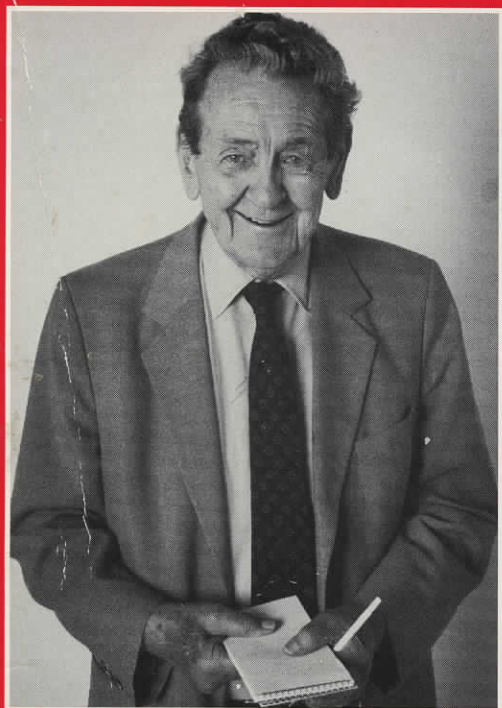


PHOTO BY THE DES MOINES REGISTER

George Mills

Newsman George Mills's beat ranges across the state and back through time. Wherever his reporter's instincts take him, Mills holds a mirror to Iowa to show us as we are. He opens by tracking Iowa's topsy-turvy troubled romance with the slot machine. Next he's on the trail of Bonnie and Clyde, then he's sifting through the wreckage of the governor's plane crash, and now he's watching in amazement as National Guardsmen level their rifles and machine guns on Iowa cattlemen. In *One-Armed Bandits*, we meet Iowans heroic and humble, involved in adventures that are by turns spine-tingling and absurd, as told by Iowa's master storyteller at the top of his form.

ISBN 0-931209-66-8

