The four New York Central Railroad locomotives left the engine house on Manhattan’s West 72nd Street with crew around 9:20 a.m. on their way uptown, where they’d link up with 60 cars loaded with freight for the day’s trip north.

It was May 22, 1967. The sky was bright blue, a picture-postcard spring day.

Once ND-5 Extra 5305 West cleared the track circuit at 105th Street, a tower operator sitting at 72nd Street would see a light and hear a bell telling him the train had crossed.

Further north, around 8:45 a.m., NY-4 Extra 2020 departed Croton, N.Y. bound for New York City after a trip that began in Syracuse, N.Y. around midnight. The freight train,
powered by three diesel locomotives, started out with 75 cars, but by then had been stripped down to 15 after stops along the way.

The trains were on a collision course.

Firemen look at the tangled wreckage of two trains that collided head-on in the New York Central railroad yards in upper Manhattan, May 22, 1967. At least seven people were killed it was reported. The collision occurred near West 148th Street, near Riverside Drive. (Photo: AP)

That morning, repairs knocked out one of two tracks that served Manhattan’s west side. The only working track was Track 1. Both trains had been given the OK to use that track.

Federal safety investigators estimated the engineers were a little over 1,500 feet away when they realized their trains were hurtling toward one another. Both were cruising along at 40 miles an hour.

They collided around 9:55 a.m. along a curve at 147th Street, some 30 blocks south of the George Washington Bridge, setting off an explosion so loud witnesses thought a bomb had exploded. Diesel engines exploded in fire. Engines were thrown over a retaining wall. A three-alarm fire raged out of control for 90 minutes.
Patrolmen carry one of the dead from the head on crash of two freight trains in a freight yard of the New York Central at West 146th Street. Six crewmen died and four more were injured, two seriously, in the unexplained disaster. Crewmen said that each train had clearance to use the same track. Mayor Lindsay, who flew to crash scene by helicopter, said: "It shouldn't have happened. This is about as bad as you will find. I guess." Asked about a possible investigation, he replied: "As soon as we get the facts, we'll decide what to do." May 22, 1967 (Photo: Photo by Richard Corkery/NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images)

Six crewmen – the engineer, fireman and brakeman from each train – were killed. Among them were several from the Hudson Valley, including Robert Orr of Poughkeepsie, James Schulthies of Germantown and Charles W. Meuser of Highland. The others were Herbert Fero of Rensselaer, Howard Bruso of Delmar and Franklin Jenkins of Ravena.

At the time, it was one of the deadliest railroad accidents in history and would become a teaching tool for railroad workers on the importance of paying attention to detail.

Georgette Zimmerman was 15 and a freshman at Highland High School when her father, fireman Charles W. Meuser Jr. died at the age of 37. Fifty years later, she can recite the day's events with vivid recall.

"I came home from school," Zimmerman recalls. "It was a beautiful spring day. We got off the bus at my grandparents' house. It was just up the road from where we lived. And there were so many cars. My grandfather had been in the hospital. We just assumed people had come there to see my grandfather only to find out...My aunt sat me down to tell me what was going on.
"It was just very traumatic," she adds, before her voice trails off.

Her mother was left to raise four children on her own, the youngest just 11 months old at the time. Over the next few years, the family lived with the death as their mother pursued a wrongful death lawsuit against New York Central.

Charles W. Meuser Jr. of Highland was killed on May 22, 1967 during a head-on collision between two freight trains on Manhattan's Upper West Side. (Photo: Photo courtesy the Meuser family)

They drew on the support of extended family, many of whom remained in and around the Town of Lloyd. Her uncle, Herb Litts, stepped in as their surrogate father.

“We were surrounded by community and family and that’s what helped us tremendously, not just at that time but throughout our lives,” Zimmerman said.

She and her husband run an apple farm, A. Zimmerman and Son, in Highland. And she raised five children in the same town where she was reared.

Throughout, she has made it a point to share stories about her father with her children and grandchildren so that the circumstances of his death would not overtake everything else.

“We had ponies on this small farm," Zimmerman said. “He worked with another carpenter and built our house himself. He was a great Dad. He liked to play cards with us and we played checkers.”

Despite working 12-hour shifts, he made time for his children even if that meant waking them out of a deep sleep.

“My mother would get annoyed sometimes because he would come home and the babies would be just going to sleep,” she said. “He didn’t think anything of just going in and picking one up. He hadn’t seen them for 24 hours.”
Some 300 mourners turned out for Charles Meuser’s funeral services at Lloyd Methodist Church, believed to be the largest ever held in the area.

The National Transportation Safety Board report pinned much of the blame for the accident on a tower operator at 72nd Street who cleared the track for Meuser’s train to head northbound. A dispatcher was cited for failing to make sure that Track 1 had been blocked for northbound traffic. And a tower operator who oversaw traffic coming from the north was criticized for not making sure that a block was put on Track 1.

“This accident involves a very large number of causal factors, any one of which, if different, could have prevented the collision or minimized its severity…,” the report issued in 1969 notes. “The Board considers the accident more indicative of a weak operating system than an occurrence governed by coincidental and predictable error.”

It adds that two tower operators were dismissed along with a dispatcher.

For years afterward, the story of the crash was shared again and again by New York railroad veterans when they wanted to make a point with their young charges.

Among those on the receiving end of the lessons was James Fahey, a former rail traffic controller for Metro-North who currently heads the commuter rail’s largest union, The Association of Commuter Rail Employees.

“When I came on in the 1970’s, the old-timers would always remind us about that accident and tell us ‘Don’t take any shortcuts, shortcuts get people killed,’ ” Fahey said. “We have never forgotten it and we never will. We think about those who died every day.”

Zimmerman has never shied from telling the story of how her father died.

"In our family we make sure that everyone knows about their father and their grandfather,” Zimmerman said. "We carry the story with us because memory is what keeps someone in your heart and so we've always kept the story alive."