

The Cranberry Portage TRAIN DISASTER



Photos Submitted by Motley G. Naylor and the Cranberry Portage Heritage Museum.

— Motley G. Naylor —

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"...workmen returning from the scene of the accident said that the engine of the work train was standing on its nose following the crash." -*Winnipeg Free Press*, 19 July, 1943

Lead Up to Disaster

It is a normal, quiet Saturday morning just after 10 a.m., on the 17th of July, 1943, at the train station in Cranberry Portage, Manitoba. That is, until railway officials standing on the platform became the first locals to find out that something had gone terribly wrong. A man, in a very dis-

traught state, was seen stumbling along the rail bed, covered in dust and frantically waving his arms. He ran as fast as he could from the direction in which a northbound work train had left just a few minutes earlier. A decision had been made to send the work train down the track north from Cranberry with a number of linemen on board. It was assumed that another train in the area, a gravel train, would have completed its task of unloading 15 cars of gravel which were to be shunted off to the Payuk siding allowing the northbound to maneuver by. Witnesses confirmed that there had been some hesitation about whether to release the northbound work train from the Cranberry station, as no clearance had been received from the gravel train that its work had been completed and that it was safe for the northbound train to proceed. Vivid in the minds of those responsible was the memory of a 1929 disaster that had taken place in the same

general area, resulting in the death of a railroader when his caboose was rammed by a northbound train. The impact in that case had also caused extensive damage to both trains involved.

The worst fears possible were confirmed as reality when the panic stricken and confused man who had run down the track was able to relate that there had been a terrible collision between the northbound train pulled by a steam locomotive and the gravel train and engine which was traversing south with a caboose and bunk car in front and trailing 15 gravel cars. The tragedy had taken place near the "Y" intersection on the Flin Flon line, 34 miles south of Flin Flon, better known as the Sherritt Junction, which provided rail service to the mining community of Sherridon. At that time the extent of the accident was not clear, but it was evident that men had been hurt and help was needed quickly.

Rescue on the Way

At the time of the accident the Sherridon train was sidetracked at the Cranberry Portage station and the main line passenger train from Flin Flon was just entering the Cranberry yard. Nurses from Cranberry Portage were on the scene of the accident in a matter of minutes, assisted by nurses from the Sherridon train. The four nurses took charge of the casualties as they were taken to the Cranberry station. Passenger members of the Fort Gary Horse Army Unit (with units in Flin Flon and Sherridon) and others proceeded to give first aid and dig the injured and dead out of the wreckage.

Word was quickly dispatched to The Pas where a rescue/medical train complete with medical personnel and equipment was assembled. The rescue train had to delay its depart-

ure for a time until a southbound train, which had been in the Cranberry yard before the tragedy, could clear the track. The rescue train was fitted with a special "hook car" (crane) coupled to the tail of the train, which would be used to remove wrecked and derailed cars from the scene. However, more tragedy was to follow. After leaving Cranberry, it appears that the rescue train, in its haste to get to the scene, was travelling about twice the recommended track speed. The "hook" car began to make a sideways rocking motion, and finally the rocking became so violent that the car went over onto its side. Nonetheless, with lives at stake, the rescue train had to push on to the scene of the accident with or without the crane car. In response to this second disaster, two more hooks had to be called in from Kamsack and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to help deal with the catastrophe.

Tragic Aftermath - The Cruel Reality

By Saturday afternoon the rescue train, with medical staff on board, arrived at the scene of the wreck. It quickly became evident that the tragedy was beyond the wildest expectations of even the pessimistic. Broken wooden cars, metal twisted into pretzel shapes, the derailed gravel cars, and steaming, smoldering ruins made the scene look like a London bombing - a fair comparison, as World War II was raging in Europe. Crowds of people were on hand, some to help out, others simply to witness the aftermath of what would later be described as the worst rail disaster ever in northern Manitoba. The rescue operation was quickly organized under the direction of the RCMP, and the medical staff in attendance were soon able to determine the toll in human suffering - which sadly counted seven railroaders

Rescue workers were first on the scene.



dead and seven more injured, some of whom would suffer painful months in recovery at The Pas Hospital. The first of the injured were quickly transported by rail south from Cranberry Portage to Root Lake (Mile 15 from The Pas) on the Flin Flon line, and then by ambulance over rain soaked roads to the hospital in The Pas. The train was unable to continue on past Root Lake to The Pas since track workers had not yet completed repairs to the railway caused by the derailment of the rescue train's hook car. Several hours later the bodies of the dead reached The Pas after special crews had built a spur track around the wreckage.

Witnesses to the accident said, "The engine, under which one body was still trapped, was standing on end following the collision." Another reported, "The first indication that I had of the impending disaster was seeing the other train rapidly advancing about four car lengths ahead." The area in which the crash took place was on a sharp curve in the rail bed, bounded by steep walls of rock that did not allow for the train crews to leap to safety before impact.

The newspaper media of the day were quick to get on to the tragic story, though they handled the sensitive issues very professionally. The headline in the *Flin Flon Daily Miner* was "Seven Dead - Seven Injured in Rail Collision". The paper noted, "Efforts Saturday morning in Flin Flon to get official information on the collision proved unavailing. Word reached here by 'grapevine' that at about 11 o'clock on Saturday morning there had been a derailment near Cranberry junction. First report was that it was caused by a washout. People expecting relatives and friends on the passenger run became alarmed and deluged the newspaper

office and radio station with telephone calls for information." The *Winnipeg Tribune* edition of Monday, 19th of July, 1943 read, "Northern Manitoba Train Wreck Kills Seven".

Meanwhile back in The Pas, at the terminal where most of the men involved in the accident worked, rumour and speculation were running wildly out of control. Word was soon received that the special rescue train was to arrive soon, carrying the remainder of the injured workers and the bodies of their dead co-workers. The station platform soon filled with anxious friends and relatives. In a brilliant show of compassion for those with friends or relatives killed or wounded, the train passed right by the station platform and the waiting crowd. It was instead shunted off to a restricted area of The Pas rail yard, where the dead and injured men were transferred to St. Anthony's Hospital without impediment.

It would be some time before the residents of The Pas would be able to learn the extent of the horrific death and destruction that were the results of the collision. However, as soon as the authorities were able to piece together the details of the accident from two uninjured witnesses and the report from the medical staff, the details of the crash and its victims were released. The dead were from Hudson Bay Junction (Sask), Dauphin, Brandon, Mafeking, and Arran (Sask). The injured were based in The Pas, Kamsack (Sask), Lady Lake (Sask), and Hudson Bay Junction (Sask). It was now clearly evident how geographically widespread the ramifications would be, affecting communities ranging all over Manitoba and Saskatchewan.



Northbound work train locomotive and car after the crash.

An auxiliary crane car from Kamsack reached the scene of the accident at Cranberry Portage around 5 a.m. Sunday morning and had the track cleared by 5 p.m., allowing the regular passenger train from Winnipeg to proceed on to Flin Flon.

On Thursday of the following week, the people of The Pas were treated to a grim reminder of the tragedy when the debris of the splintered wooden rail cars and the torn and twisted metal that had once been two very powerful steam locomotives were brought back from the site of the disaster. Only the front of one locomotive was recognizable amongst the tortured metal, its shape that of the steam engine so familiar to local residents. The remains of the cable men's car and caboose were indistinguishable, having been mashed beyond recognition between the two heavy steam engines as they came crashing together.

The final chapter of a tragic story had been completed, but the shock and mourning would last for years in each respective community affected by the event. The bodies of the dead were shipped home and the long road to recovery commenced for those injured and directly affected.

Reflections

In 1943, in northern Manitoba, the railroad was king. It opened up the area to develop its untapped resources, like base metals, lumber, and hydroelectric power. The railroad was the lifeline for The Pas, Cranberry Portage, Sherritt,

and Flin Flon. Hundreds of people were employed in the railroad industry and thousands more travelled on the rails. So, cruel as it may seem, tragedies are often part of progress. One can only wonder what the thoughts of

Harry Falconer McLean were on hearing of the terrible events. McLean, as the fiery president of Dominion Construction, completed the railroad from The Pas to Flin Flon in 1928. The president was no stranger to big construction projects and, sadly, the accidents that are a

part of them. The cairn that he had built at the Sherritt Junction included a tribute to the workers who had been killed or injured during the railroad's construction. McLean knew the inevitable consequences of his mammoth projects and never tried to hide it.

So, maybe in the same way, the cairn that is still in place today near the peaceful and serene area of the accident, which overlooks the beautiful Cameron Bay of Lake

Atchapuskow, can also be recognized as a dedication to those killed or injured on that fateful day. Harry Falconer McLean would be pleased, I am sure.

And what about the brave people who did their best to save or rescue those involved? We can only hope that the families of the victims took some solace in the help of the courageous people from Cranberry Portage and the rail passengers available. They all responded so quickly, from the rescue train workers and medical staff, to the ambulance drivers ferrying people from Root Lake to The Pas, and of course to the medical personnel of The Pas hospital itself. They did all they could.

As we close this chapter of historic events here in the north, we trust that history will treat all those involved in the rescue efforts kindly, and simply remember them as ordinary people who did extraordinary things in the face of human tragedy.



Steep rock ridges near the crash site at Sheritt Junction.



A Modern train pulls into Cranberry Portage from south.