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50 YEARS AGO

The Dundas Christmas Night Wreck

by Archie Douglas

It was the evening of Tuesday, December 25th, 1934. For the crowd in the London, Ont. CNR station the celebrations were over. Our thoughts were on returning to our homes as we waited, more or less patiently, for Train No. 16 to load and get us on our way. Little did we realize what lay ahead for us down the line.

With the heavy Christmas traffic, 16 was running in two sections. The first, carrying seven cars, was scheduled to run directly through to Toronto, while the second, with 15 cars, would follow as far as Bayview Junction, then back the two miles or so into the Hamilton station, before proceeding on to Toronto. These were the grand old days of the steam locomotive. A Pacific type, No. 5300, would haul the first section, while No. 6144, one of the CN's powerful Northern types, would haul the heavier second section.

First 16 loaded and left town. Those of us headed for Hamilton joined the crowd surging into the cars of the second section. Shortly we were rolling eastward. With the big Northern providing plenty of power up front, we made good time between stops. Brantford, the last scheduled stop before Hamilton, was finally behind us and we were soon at Copetown, roaring down the 10 mile stretch of 1% grade toward Dundas and Bayview.

For me, this was home territory. As a kid, living in Dundas, I had often walked up and down the grade, and, on one occasion, "ridden the rods". What greater thrill could there be for a young railfan than to gape at the Grand Trunk's 40-car freights, as they stomped up the grade with a pusher in back, or to hear the music of the clanking siderods as a helper coasted back down to Bayview? Later, in the thirties, there were many other thrills, such as the cent-a-mile excursion trains, when as many as 22 coaches were to be seen behind one engine. In 1930 there had been the splendid sight of No. 5700, the first of the CNR's high-stepping Hudsons, roaring up the grade on a test run.

Added to these was the memory of "Barney" Ofield and his runaway freight. Apparently the mandatory brake test had been overlooked when his train reached Copetown at the top of the grade. When brakes were needed there were none. From our classroom in the old Dundas High School we heard the great roar and saw the train streaking down the grade. Approaching Bayview the crew jumped, just before their train crashed into another freight. "Barney" was suspended, but later reinstated. Several years later he died in the cab of his locomotive, of a heart attack, while bringing a freight into Hamilton from Black Rock.

While these memories went through my mind, we had neared the Dundas station. The brakes had gone on, to slow the train for the crossing of the "Big Fill" just below the station, where rails cross the mouth of the Fisher Ravine. Once across the fill, it was to be expected that speed would pick up but, on the contrary, the brakes went on in an emergency application, and the coaches in our train bucked and bounced before coming to a rough stop. What had happened? One joker in the coach suggested that we had hit some farmer's cow. None of the crew showed up to enlighten us, so after 10 minutes or so several of us got off and made our way alongside the train toward the flickering lights we could see ahead. Little were we prepared for the spectacle of death and destruction that met our eyes when we reached the front of the train.

The big Northern had been switched off the main line into a siding. On that siding had been sitting first 16. (No. 5300 had developed a hot pin, and the train had been sidetracked, with a trainman being sent back the half mile to Dundas station to call for a relief engine from Hamilton). The switch had evidently been thrown almost under the wheels of 6144. With the heavy train on the downgrade, the engineer had been helpless to prevent the locomotive from slicing right through the two wooden parlour cars at the rear end of first 16. These were, of course, totally demolished, except for the roof of the rear car, which lay intact, stretched out full length on top of No. 6144.

The crews of the two trains, with others from a freight stopped alongside on the westbound track, plus volunteers from among the passengers, were frantically doing what they could for the injured, pending arrival of medical help. For 16 of those who had been in the parlour cars, mortal help was of no avail.

When the story came out, it was said that the trainman who was to go for help had been "under the influence", and was unaware that his train was safely on the sidetrack. Seeing No. 6144 bearing down on him, he rushed to the switch stand and sent us crashing into the rear of his own train. The wreck occurred at about 9:20 p.m. It was into the wee small hours of the morning before our trains were able to continue on to their destinations, bringing an end to a Christmas night that, 50 years later, is still vivid in memory.