

THE SEMAPHORE

...order board news from

Windsor-Essex Division

Canadian Railroad Historical Association



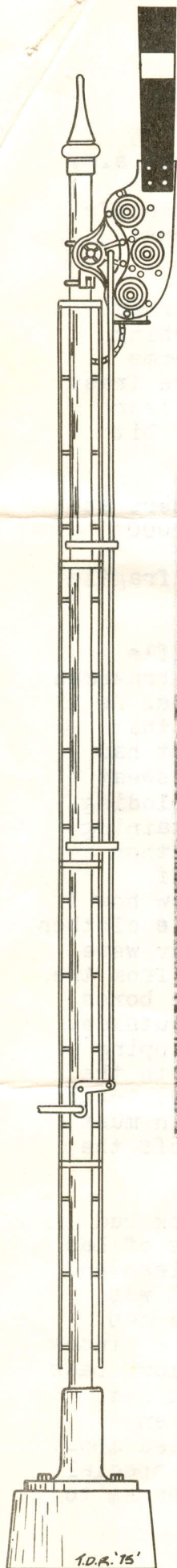
Essex M.C.R. Depot

10:10 a.m., August 10, 1907

Train Order No. 2

April 1976

300 Cabana Rd.E., Windsor, Ont. N9G 1A2



"THE DAY THE WORLD STOOD STILL FOR ESSEX ONTARIO"

The date is August 10, 1907, the place; Essex Ontario, the time; 10:05 a.m.

What baneful incident could possibly disturb the quiet rythmn of a peaceful summer day in this small tranquil farming community? This question must have been asked by thousands on that frightful day, 69 years ago.

It was a Saturday, and it started out much like any lazy summer Saturday would. The sky was clear and sunny, the temperature was already reaching for the high 70's. Children played joyfully, shoppers from nearby farms were already starting to flood into town, the air was filled with the fresh scent of newly cut clover and if one listened close enough he could hear an occasional morning dove calling to its mate. No one was the least bit aware of the tragedy that loomed over their heads.

Not more than a quarter of a mile away from the main influx of shoppers at the Michigan Central Depot a train was being made up to transport 5,000 pounds of dynamite to Amherstburg to the Dunbar and Sullivan Co. for dredging the Detroit River channel. Little did anyone know that the fragile cargo would never make its final destination.

Off in the distance at the depot could be heard what seemed to be rifle shots going off. On hearing this conductor Joesph Berry and his two brakeman Joesph McNary and Leo Conlon went to investigate these strange noises. As they approached the box car containing the dynamite they discovered that some of the boxes had fallen over. the intense heat and humidity that had been present for the past few days had caused the nitro-glycerin to sweat out of its absorbent, the dynamite, thus striking the ground and exploding. The train started to slowly back up to be coupled up to the car containing the dynamite. As the two couplers inched themselves closer to each other conductor Berry, lying on a couch, in the Aberdeen Hotel gave a brief description of the disaster that was only seconds away. "I don't know how I escaped death" he said, as his head was swathed with bandages and his clothes spattered with blood. "I saw both my trainmen blown to atoms, as they were only a few feet in front of me. We noticed the dynamite was leaking from the car and on investigation found it in a molten condition. Some of the boxes had fallen down, and we stood them up. Conlon and McNary were both outside, one near the end of the car and the other standing with one hand gripping the car door. I was across the tracks as I did not feel any to safe in the immediate presence of the car. I don't remember anything after the explosion occured." From all speculation the force of the coupling of the train must have jarred the nitro-glycerin that was present just enough to set off the explosion.

The force of the explosion blew a hole fifteen feet deep in the track bed where was found the burned torso of Joesph McNary, while only pieces of Leo Conlon were found. Some as far away as four hundred feet. Bits of flesh and blood were strewn everywhere. The engine remained on the tracks, but was extensively damaged. The engineer and fireman were hurled out of the cab like dolls. The force of the blast created a vacuum so great that the window glass in the Canadian Imperial Bank was hurled into the bank then blown back out. A horse standing nearby was killed when a piece of rail pierced its body. Pieces of rail as long as two feet were hurled as far as fifteen hundred feet. The towns only doctor, J.W.Brien, who had been ill, died about two hours after the tragedy of natural causes and possibly shock. A special train from Windsor brought doctors and nurses to aid the injured, thanks to the switchboard operation of Misses Flossie and May Cockburn.

As in all disasters there were many people, who for some strange reason, narrowly escaped death. One such example was a barber in his shop two blocks away, shaving a customer when a piece of flying metal took the razor right out of his hands. Another was an excursion train from Brantford to Detroit full of holidayers that was due to arrive at the M.C.R. depot seconds before the explosion. Fortunately it was running late that morning.

Glass lay thick on Talbot Street, the main street of Essex. Practically every window on that street was smashed as a result of the explosion. The Methodist church, the planing mill, grist mill, electricity plant, carriage works, warehouse and elevator as well as several homes were completely wrecked. The shock of the explosion was so pronounced in Windsor, although the distance is sixteen miles, that several buildings in different parts of the city were slightly damaged. By early afternoon, Highway 3, then a dirt road was one continuous cloud of dust as good samaritans rushed to Essex in every conceivable kind of transportation. The Windsor Evening Record of Monday August 12, 1907, stated that the property damage would probably run up to a quarter of a million dollars.

At an investigation, it was established that the dynamite was improperly cured and that the railroad was held responsible for the careless handling of the dynamite. The company was fined \$125,000 to help repair the damage to the town.

Two remarkable features were associated with the explosion. One was the small loss of life. That being the two trainmen and Dr. Brien. The other was the speedy recovery of the town of Essex. One of the most glorious things about the human mind is its recuperative power, its ability to triumph over the misfortune of the past and to move on to new and greater accomplishments.

Information sources: Mrs. Evelyn Walker of the Windsor Star
Dr. Neil Morrison Ph.D.