

FIFTY YEARS AGO

Montreal's Windsor Station Accident

by Omer S.A. Lavallée

It will be fifty years, on St. Patrick's Day, 1959, since a runaway train violated the passenger precincts of Montreal's Windsor Station, bringing death to five people.

This is the only major accident which has happened in the seventy years during which the Canadian Pacific's station and headquarters has been open to the public, but because of the mysterious and spectacular aspects of this incident, it is a tale which has been told and retold among railway personnel in the Montreal area. Many retired men can recall the events clearly to mind; the fireman on the ill-fated train died a natural death as recently as September 1958, and one of the Association's associate members, Mr. John E. Tinkler, of Hudson, Quebec, a retired CPR mechanical man, recalls the day of the accident as if it were yesterday.

The train was the overnight Boston-Montreal run No. 12, consisting of engine 902, a 4-6-0 built by North British in 1903, a baggage car, two passenger cars, and a sleeping car. It was in charge of Conductor Arthur H. Harvey when it left Newport at 4:55 AM, March 17, 1909, due in Montreal at 8:30 AM. The engineman in charge of No. 902 was Mark Cunningham, his fireman was Louis Craig. Joseph E. Pelletier was the baggageman and Joseph A. Dion was the trainman. The trip proceeded uneventfully toward Montreal, the train making its customary stop at Montreal Junction, now known as Montreal West.

Leaving Montreal West, Conductor Harvey gave his engineer the communicating signal which corresponded to the present signal 16 (d) --(stop at the next station), as he had a passenger to descend at Westmount. Engineer Cunningham acknowledged this signal on his engine whistle, also as prescribed by the rules, but it was after this acknowledgment was made that the prime event occurred which led directly to the accident.

According to the testimony of the fireman at the coroner's inquest, somewhere between Montreal Junction and Westmount, a plug blew on the boiler on the fireman's side, frightening him and filling the cab with live steam. He responded instantly to his initial reaction to jump, thinking that the boiler was about to explode. Landing in a snowbank, he was unhurt, suffering only a few bruises. The train rolled by him on its way to Westmount, the passengers and crew completely unaware of what had happened. Only when the train failed to stop at Westmount, was any concern manifested. The conductor attributed the failure to stop to the engineer having forgotten to do so (Westmount was only a conditional stop in those days) and decided to allow him to go into Windsor Station, which the passenger who had wished to descend was agreeable to.

While accounts in the possession of the writer do not give exact details, it is apparent that Engineer Cunningham finally left the engine, after trying unsuccessfully to stop it, somewhere after passing Westmount Station. The train continued until, with the speed still unchecked passing over the Guy Street interlocking, one of the trainmen suspected that the engine was out of control and pulled the emergency cord. This had the effect of checking the speed seriously, indeed with

such a shock that the passengers were shaken up considerably, and the sleeping car porter, caught unawares, perhaps making up his berths, was thrown halfway along the aisle of the car.

While the speed of the train was estimated to have been between thirty-five and forty miles per hour just before the emergency brakes were applied, nonetheless the momentum carried it into the station, through the buffer stop, across the concourse, through the wall separating the concourse from the ladies' waiting room, finally stopping in that room. The engine remained almost upright, leaning against one of the pillars supporting the ceiling. The tender sank part way through the floor into the vaults, while the baggage car jackknifed and broke through the glass and metal latticework which screened off the south end of the concourse overlooking Donegana Street (the westward extension of Lag-auchetiere Street). The station at that time consisted only of five tracks, with the fifth track on the south side parallel to Donegana Street.

The death toll was tragic. Killed were Mrs. W.J. Nixon of Ash Avenue, Verdun, and her two children, Marjorie and Ross. Another child, Elsie Villiers, who was also in the waiting room at the time, also died in the accident. The fifth victim was Mark Cunningham, the engineer, who suffered a fractured skull when he jumped from the runaway engine sometime after Fireman Craig. Both were picked up by the Point Fortune local train which followed the Boston train into the station, but Cunningham never regained consciousness and he died the day after the accident.

The case of the Nixon family was a particularly pitiful one. Mrs. Nixon and her two children were at the station to wait the return of Mr. Nixon, a train dispatcher at Medicine Hat, who was due in on the transcontinental train some time later. When Nixon did arrive, he saw the accident, but hastened home to Ash Avenue to see his family. Being told by neighbours that his wife and children had gone to the station to meet him, he returned to Windsor Station only to find out the worst.

Several days were required to remove the engine, tender, and baggage car from the building. Building engineers were profuse in their admiration for the structure of the building which could stand the shock and remain structurally sound. The Passenger Department occupied the floor above the waiting room where many of the pillars were knocked out by the careening engine. One can picture the consternation in this department when the crash came and the floor suddenly sagged dangerously. Among the injured was a clerk in the office of the CPR special police service, who occupied offices in the vault below the concourse. He was trapped for two hours by broken building beams, but was extricated without serious injury. Thomas Whelan, a gateman who later became Station-master, showed great presence of mind, in getting passengers who were clustered around the end of the track awaiting the train, out of the way when it became obvious that the train was not going to stop. The contrasts were striking; The wreckage of the engine, tender, and the baggage car necessitated the dismantling of these units to remove them; the passenger cars didn't leave the tracks nor was a pane of glass broken in them.

An investigation headed by Mr. D. McNicoll of the Canadian Pacific Railway, revealed that a washout plug blew out on the fireman's side of the engine. Why the cab would fill with steam remains a mystery

To continue our description of tunnelling on the Saint Gotthard Railway, on the southern side of the main tunnel, the railway negotiates four spiral tunnels. First is the Frengio, 1712 yards long and immediately across the Ticino River is the Prato, 1711 yards in length, each tunnel giving the railway a difference in elevation of 118 feet. A short distance further on, the railway enters the Biaschina Gorge with two other spectacular spirals. The upper tunnel is the Piano Tondo, 1643 yards long and the lower is the Lavi tunnel, 1706 yards in length. One tunnel is immediately above the other on the same side of the valley, and the line drops 300 feet at this point. Stations on each side of the Biaschina spirals, Roldesio and Glomio, 9 miles apart in a direct line, are 13½ miles distant by rail.

Let us now turn our attention towards the most ambitious project of all, the world-renowned Simplon.

(to be continued)

Windsor Station Accident (cont'd)

As the plug would be below, and outside of, the cab. All of the boiler staybolts appeared to be intact. The only person who might have been able to shed more details on this tragic accident, the engineer, was never able to give testimony before he died.

Fireman Craig, who, in an interview with a newspaper reporter, expressed fear that he would lose his job, remained with the company, becoming an engineer and retiring in April 1953. He died only six months ago. Engine 902 was taken to Angus Shops and repaired. As No. 2102, class E-5-e, it was finally scrapped in 1938.

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NOTES

and
NEWS

... by Forster Kemp

- Canadian National Railways began operation of a new line in the Montreal Area in January. The line runs from Brossseau, Que., on the Rouses Point Subdivision, to Castle Gardens on the Granby Subdivision (formerly Montreal & Southern Counties Rly.). First use of the line was made, commencing Wednesday, January 28th, by freight trains between the hours of 8:00 AM and 4:00PM for the purpose of settling the track. It is expected that all trains will be using the new line by the summer. The purpose of the

line is to eliminate the necessity of trains, to and from the Rouses Point and Massena Subdivisions, having to back from St. Lambert to and from Southwark Yard, should they have cars to pick up or set off there. The new route, via the former M&C Junction, will take them through Southwark Yard. It will also eliminate the sharp curvature of the line laid in 1864 to connect the Montreal & Champlain Rly. with