

Harwood's Rail Heritage

A Brief History in Four Parts by Ted Rafuse

Part 4. Mishaps along the way

Mid 19th century rail operations were fraught with multiple forms of mishaps, some of which were humorous in hindsight, others of which were calamitous and caused death. The Cobourg & Peterborough Railway and its offspring did not escape these tragedies. A few of these occurrences are related below.

In these early days of railroading attention to the safety of limb and life was considered to be the responsibility of the individual and not of the employer. Personal injury accidents were common and too often attended with loss of life.



The C&PRy never experienced a major mishap such as two locomotives colliding head on but there were occasions when company property was severely damaged. One incident happened as engineer Benjamin Tukes suddenly felt his iron steed jump unexpectedly. Correctly concluding that one of the forward truck wheels of his 4-4-0 locomotive had broken he immediately whistled "on brakes." The several brakemen aboard the train quickly mounted the ladders and clambered to the roofs of the cars in order to apply the hand brakes. Their action prevented four lumber cars, one box car and one passenger car from a damaging fall into the adjacent ditch. Meanwhile the locomotive was not so fortunate as after several bounces along the ties it left the track completely and plunged ten feet down an embankment coming to rest upon its side. Although not terribly damaged the locomotive was unable to perform its duties for several weeks until repairs were completed. (*Peterborough Review*, January 11, 1855)

From a Drawing by O. V. Schubert.

A typical brakeman doing his job

Brakeman Anthony Fox had the misfortune of being the first C&PRy employee to be killed while on duty. At the time of his fatality in 1855, link and pin couplers were used to join railway cars and this union required that a brakeman position himself between the ends of two cars to be linked together. A pin had to be lifted and a chain link positioned so that the pin could be returned to its rest and thereby hold the link in a secured location. While performing this manoeuver at Harwood, Mr. Fox apparently was squeezed between a flat car and a box car. He did not complain of any injury at the time but several miles later intense pain compelled him to be comforted in the passenger car. Once in Cobourg, despite his agony, and as a testament to his personal constitution, Fox walked to the Doctor, then continued home. Unfortunately three days late he succumbed to his internal injuries. (*Cobourg Star*, May 2, 1855)

In June 1858 brakeman George Brown became the second employee to lose his life as a result of injuries sustained while working for the C&PRy. Brakemen then had to jump, often while the train was in motion, from one railway car to the next in order to perform their braking duties. Brown, while jumping from one car to the next, lost his footing, fell on the track, and was run over. The car wheels stripped the flesh from his left arm and shoulder, broke his collar bone and several ribs, and severed his left foot from his leg.

Miraculously he survived the initial ordeal and was removed first to Dytcher's Tavern and then to Toronto. There he died three days later. Brown was survived by a wife and four children. In all such cases of injury and death the families were left destitute as there were no accident or death benefits in those days. (*Peterborough Examiner*, July 1, 1858)

Some incidents had a tinge of saturnine humour in attendance. Cows, unfettered by fences adjacent to early railway rights of way, held an uncanny ability of derailing the lightweight locomotives of the era. One C&PRy locomotive suffered slight damage when it and several bovines contested the privilege of occupying the right of way between the rail heads. At the heady speed of six miles per hour, and the sudden application of the hand brakes to avoid a deadly impact, several freight cars were derailed with slight consequent damage. The fate of the cows was not recorded. (*Cobourg Star*, September 26, 1855)

Even the new railway, the Cobourg, Peterborough & Marmora Railway & Mining Company was not immune to mishap. Celebrating the opening of the new extension to the Marmora Iron Mines, the train full of festive participants suffered an ignominy on the return trip while just south of Harwood. The *Cobourg World* in its July 5, 1867 issue, reported, "We regret to have to announce that after a most delightful day at the mines, about midnight last night, just after the Cobourg party, consisting of about 150 of our citizens, had left Harwood for home, having succeeded half a mile on their journey, the fine new engine, 'Marmora', ran over two cows which lay upon the track, cutting them to pieces and being itself thrown from the rails, was precipitated down an embankment of twelve feet, at the bottom of which it now lies, upon its back, a complete wreck. Fortunately the coupling attaching it to the tender broke, otherwise the whole train must have shared the fate of the engine, in all probability with the sacrifice of lives. As it was, no one has been injured. A few of the party walked the fifteen miles home; while the bulk returned to Harwood and will reach home as best they can." (The locomotive was eventually repaired and returned to service.)

A most deplorable accident befell Conductor Michael Mulhall in the fall of 1870 near Harwood. It was customary at the time to detach the engine from some of the cars at Summit a short distance south of the village. This allowed the train to run down the grade into Harwood by gravity. Mulhall had just released the cars and was stepping away from the tender to the first car when he missed his footing and fell to the track. The whole of the fifteen cars passed over his body. Death was instantaneous as his head was almost severed from his torso. Mulhall was the oldest and most respected conductor on the line at the time of the fatal accident. (*Cobourg World*, October 28, 1870)

The above incidents tell but a very brief history of the travails and dangers of working on early Canadian railways. Unfortunately such incidents were frequent and the lack of safety instructions and appliances led to numerous injuries and many deaths. Despite these dangers, railways became a vital part of the history of this area and of Canada in general.