

Local Railway Items from Area Papers - 1999

03/01/1999 Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Dwyer Hill

Pakenham area man killed at rail crossing

Passenger train collided with pickup truck

A 56-year-old Pakenham-area man was killed yesterday when his pickup truck was sliced in half by a VIA Rail passenger train at O'Neil and Dwyer Hill roads, west of North Gower.

The cab of the truck was dragged for about a kilometre and jammed under the locomotive, preventing the Toronto to Ottawa train from moving for 6 1/2 hours.

The 129 passengers remained on board the train and were taken by bus to Ottawa.

The collision was the third-level crossing accident in Eastern Ontario since Nov. 21.

The crash, at a private crossing marked only by a stop sign, propelled the box of the 1988 silver grey General Motors truck into a nearby ditch and left the area strewn with the rear axle, a wheel and other parts.

Police said the southbound truck collided with an eastbound VIA train at about 12:45 p.m. Investigators said they could not release the man's name until he has been positively identified.

VIA Rail spokesman Malcolm Andrews said there have been too many level crossing accidents recently in Eastern Ontario because drivers aren't careful enough.

Mr. Andrews said motorists should slow down and stop, especially in rural areas where there are no warning lights and roads are slippery.

Linda Kilby, who lives across the road from the crossing, said she heard a loud banging noise when her husband was leaving for work.

"My husband said he saw a truck at the crossing as he was backing his car out and all of a sudden there was nothing," Ms. Kilby said. "We knew there had been an accident so we grabbed some blankets to help, but there was nothing left of the truck. It is so sad there was nothing we could do."

Ron Holmes, who lives beside the crossing, said it is difficult to see approaching trains because they are partly hidden by bushes, a CN Rail hut and a large pile of railway ties.

"The problem is that this crossing is controlled by only a stop sign," Mr. Holmes said. "At Dwyer Hill there is a proper crossing with lights and a gate that comes down."

"Here you can't see the trains because of the brush close to the tracks and the shed near the crossing. It's hard to see anything coming because the railway piles material close to the tracks for repairing the whole line."

Donald Ross, an inspector from the Transportation Safety Board, said he was investigating the accident to determine whether there was a clear line of sight at the crossing.

"Level crossings are always a concern because of accidents," Mr. Ross said. "We will check the large shed which is near the tracks to see if there is enough visibility. But people should take extra care at unprotected crossings like this."

Two other recent level crossing accidents killed one man and left another with serious injuries.

Brian Friesen, 34, of Smiths Falls died when his 1990 Ford Tempo collided with a northbound VIA train at a crossing in Rideau Lake Township on New Year's Eve.

A unidentified 28-year-old Carlsbad Springs man suffered broken bones, cuts and bruises when his truck was crushed by a freight train in Carlsbad Springs 15 kilometres southeast of Ottawa on Nov. 21.

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Smiths Falls

Dwyer Hill

Improve visibility, Via urged

Investigators say man killed had not stopped at crossing

By Dave Rogers

Via Rail and property owners should improve the visibility at railway crossings to reduce the risk of accidents like the collision that killed a Pakenham-area man Saturday, the president of Transport 2000 said yesterday.

Harry Gow said railways must ensure that drivers can see approaching trains because of the large number of level crossing accidents in Eastern Ontario during the past year. Mr. Gow added drivers should be cautious when approaching high-speed passenger lines, especially during the winter, when their windows are fogged and roads are slippery.

Allyn Richard Warren, 56, died when his grey 1988 GMC pickup truck was sliced in half at O'Neil and Dwyer Hill roads at about 12:45 p.m. Saturday.

Jacques Babin, a spokesman for the federal Transportation Safety Board, said Mr. Warren didn't stop at a private crossing on a driveway off O'Neil Road. He said trains are visible more than a kilometre from the crossing. An investigation of the accident is to be completed today or tomorrow.

The 145 passengers on the Toronto-to-Ottawa train had to wait 6 1/2 hours for a bus to Ottawa because the cab of the truck became wedged under the locomotive.

Via Rail spokesman Malcolm Andrews said there has been an "inordinate number" of level crossing accidents in Eastern Ontario during the past year. Mr.

Andrews said drivers should be more careful in rural areas so they can stop at warning lights and uncontrolled crossings.

People who live near the crossing where Mr. Warren was killed complained that visibility is limited by bushes growing near the tracks, piles of railway ties and gravel, and a CN maintenance shed.

Mr. Gow said private crossings are one of the worst railway hazards.

"There must be an examination of visibility at railway crossings to reduce the danger to human life," Mr. Gow said. "But you have to stop at the crossing signs."

People who think they can take a chance are often dead wrong.

"There have been level crossing accidents at Carlsbad Springs, Mer Bleue and at least three bad collisions within 20 miles of the Dwyer Hill area during the past few years. People began to think something was wrong when a police car was hit near Casselman about five years ago."

Robert Spack, a Transport 2000 member who has worked for CN Rail and Via Rail, said the passenger trains travel at more than 150 kmh near Dwyer Hill. He said drivers crossing Via lines should be cautious because trains travel so quickly.

"I have been in a locomotive cab and have seen the way people drive and I am surprised there isn't a level crossing accident every day. Some people will stop in a crossing or even back up to look at the train."

Wayne Millar, Mr. Warren's neighbour, said his friend was checking his trap lines in the Marlborough Forest before the accident. He said Mr. Warren had been a banker and realtor before moving to the Pakenham area six years ago, but his real love was hunting deer and trapping beaver.

"You couldn't ask for a better neighbour," Mr. Millar said. "Before Christmas he called and said he wanted to see me in five minutes. He brought us a great big plate of cookies, squares and chocolates and wished us merry Christmas. That was the last time I saw him."

"I always saw him three or four times a week and we would stop to chat. He would ask my son how he liked university and told us we could count on him if we ever needed help."

Heather Kincaid, the minister of Cedar Hill United Church near Pakenham, said Mr. Warren had worked in banks for 20 years, but loved the outdoors.

"A very dear man has been lost in this tragic accident," Ms. Kincaid said. "He was a hard-working family man. He had a son and two daughters."

"The family wondered how the accident happened and whether he saw the train. This is a real tragedy."

Two Killed as Train Hits Car

Man, woman from Brockville area die at construction site

ELIZABETHTOWN A man and a woman from the Brockville area died after a VIA Rail passenger train rammed into their car yesterday afternoon at a rural railway crossing 90 kilometres south of Ottawa.

Shortly after 2 p.m., the white, four-door car drifted slowly through flashing railway crossing warning lights, where it was broadsided by a train, throwing it into the air and shredding the passenger side.

"I saw this white car pass the laneway and I thought, 'Oh my God,' and started yelling, because I could sense where the train was," said Mary James, who was gardening at her house near the tracks when the accident happened. "The train hit it right on and the car went right up in the air and came right down."

The Ontario Provincial Police did not release the names of the victims, who were pronounced dead at the scene by coroner Dr. Paul O'Connor.

The train was travelling northbound to Ottawa when it struck the eastbound car in a construction zone. The train sustained only minor damage and no one on board was hurt, according to OPP Sgt. Kevin Prentiss.

The Elizabethtown accident occurred in a slight dip along County Road 28, within sight of four houses. Construction work has been ongoing at the intersection. Immediately after the accident, work crews and nearby neighbours rushed to the scene, according to nearby resident Rob Pringle.

Mr. Pringle witnessed the accident from his verandah.

He said the car disappeared behind the train as soon as it was hit, and the next time he saw it, it had spun 180 degrees. He ran over to help, but some construction workers on the scene had already gotten there.

After finding out how bad it was, Mr. Pringle said he turned to stop his wife from getting too close. "I knew it wouldn't be a nice thing to see," he said.

Mrs. James' husband, Barry, went to the crash site after hearing the collision from his basement. He said the midsized car "couldn't have been more than two-feet thick."

The car's driver didn't seem to have seen the train, and neither vehicle seemed to be breaking before the collision.

"I don't know if he was distracted or what," Mr. Pringle said. "For some unknown reason, he just kept going."

About six hours after the accident, the crumpled car was pulled from its resting spot several metres north of the crossing and taken away on a flat-bed tow truck. It was severely damaged the passenger side door pushed more than half way across the vehicle.

Police and rail officials were taking measurements to try to determine what happened after the initial collision, checking the flashing lights and interviewing witnesses.

"It's very, very early in our investigation right now," said Const. Mike Benn of the OPP Brockville detachment. "We have to examine every angle of what happened before the true picture will come out."

The car was thrown about 13 metres down the track northwards. A team of construction workers toiled under generator-powered floodlights to repair a huge gouge in the pavement made by the car after it was struck. Every half hour or so, another train would rumble through the scene.

The train was en route to Ottawa from Toronto, stopping at Oshawa, Cobourg, Kingston, and Brockville.

Seven minutes late pulling out of Brockville, train 642 hit the car at 2:20 p.m. yesterday.

In Ottawa, a VIA official said a visual inspection was made at the crash site. After the train was deemed safe it carried 100 passengers to Ottawa, but was two hours and 45 minutes late, arriving at 5:55 p.m. almost seven hours after leaving Toronto.

"I spoke to one passenger who said it felt like a car driving onto the gravel shoulder," said VIA ticket agent Arthur LeClerc. He said most of the passengers accepted the incident and the delay, and were not overly upset.

"The people usually understand when there is that kind of accident where there are fatalities. It's not like a mechanical problem. They don't blame VIA"

The train was supposed to collect about 45 passengers in Ottawa bound for Montreal, but those passengers were put on a bus chartered by VIA and given a 50-per-cent credit on their next trip with railway. Train 642 continued to Montreal last night without passengers, according to VIA spokeswoman Julie Durocher.

"Well, they weren't too crazy about taking the bus," said Mr. LeClerc. "They were here to take the train." The bus, he added, "is not as comfortable as the train. Not only that, it's a lot safer by train."

Ms. Durocher said the crossing where the collision occurred in Elizabethtown is classified as "protected" with warning lights and bells but no barricades to prevent highway traffic from passing through.

Mrs. James' husband, Barry, said people often drive through the warning lights at the crossing, which has no barricade.

"People drive across these tracks like idiots all the time," said Mr. James, adding that the crossing is dangerous because the tracks dip into a valley after the train has finished a long curve, giving drivers little warning of oncoming trains.

Mrs. James added: "It was all like slow-motion in a split-second. You could tell the train wasn't going to stop. If people could see how quick this was, they would stop at railroad tracks."

Mr. James said the crossing hasn't had an incident like this since two men tried to race the train 25 years ago. One of the men died and the other was seriously injured in that crash. That accident prompted authorities to erect warning lights and install bells.

Police Hunt for clues in deadly collision

Train-car crash killed Algonquin retiree, wife

By Jake Rupert

OPP investigators spent yesterday trying to piece together exactly what happened leading up to the moment a VIA Rail train crashed into a car on a level crossing north of Brockville Saturday.

John Edwards, 70, and his wife Carol, 54, were killed instantly when the impact of the train left their white Mercury Sable a tangled mess of steel.

Brockville OPP Const. Mike Benn says all possible explanations for the crash are being examined.

The collision happened at about 2:20 p.m. on Leeds and Grenville County Road 28 at Bellamy's Crossing a location Mr. Edwards had driven through many times before.

Witnesses said the lights and bells at the crossing were working when the eastbound car, travelling at a slow but steady speed, entered the path of the train, which was going north to Ottawa from Brockville at about 130 kmh.

The engineer of the train would not have been able to see the car until the last instant because the track curves just before the crossing. Drivers travelling east on the county road would also have trouble seeing the train as roughly two-metre-high mounds of dirt run parallel to the tracks leading up to the crossing.

Workers from an engineering company were digging up the road on the east side of the tracks at the time of the crash to lay fiber optic cable. It isn't known if the construction work played a role in the accident.

"We'll be checking out everything," Const. Benn said. "Right now, we just don't have enough information to say why this happened"

Const Benn and Sgt. Kevin Prentiss will base their findings on witness statements, information gleaned from a detailed technical reconstruction of the collision and an examination of what's left of the car. Autopsies are also being done today on the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Edwards.

News of the accident travelled quickly through the small communities of North Augusta and the village of Algonquin, 15 kilometres north of Brockville, where the couple, who had been married nearly 35 years, lived.

Yesterday, everybody knew who had died and expressed their sympathy for the members of the well-known Edwards family.

"It's really been a hard day around here," said the Edwards' neighbour Richard Thompson, 43. "They'll be missed. They were good people."

Purvis Weir, a friend who has known Mr. Edwards for 60 years, described him as "a great family man who has raised two lovely boys. He was an all-round nice guy who worked hard, and so did his wife who was a registered nurse."

People in Algonquin described Mr. Edwards, a retiree, as a quiet man who was friendly to all. He was also an avid walker who could be seen walking for miles along the rural roads checkering the rolling green landscape in the area.

When contacted, the Edwards' adult children could not bring themselves to talk about the loss of their parents.

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Kingston (CN)

Morrisburg

Train cars derail near Morrisburg

CN Rail police worked through the night investigating the cause of a freight train derailment near Morrisburg.

Last night, 13 cars on a Toronto-bound freight train left the tracks near the St. Lawrence Seaway town.

Although many of the 120 cars near the front of the train were said to contain a variety of dangerous chemicals, none of those cars were involved.

Firefighters said that all the derailed cars were carrying paper products, and there was no danger to the environment or to anyone living nearby. No one was injured in the incident.

Romancing the Trains

Ottawa Central Railway's love affair with locomotives is all business - almost

Jeff Pappone reports

In the romantic tradition of trains, two area railworkers never fail to perform their most important duty of the day waving to every child they see.

Engineer Claude Talbot and conductor Roch Martin concern themselves with hundreds of details as they pilot their freight train from Ottawa to Pembroke and back.

But they're always on the lookout for youngsters usually with huge grins and flailing arms who greet the Ottawa Central Railway crew along the 150-kilometre route. After more than eight months on the run, they know all the spots where the members of their "fan club" gather.

"It's our most important job," Mr. Martin explains. "Sometimes a wave from us is the best part of these kids' days. When you go to engineer's school, one of the things they tell you is: It's part of your job to wave to kids."

The pair travels to Pembroke five times per week with several stops along the way hauling raw materials north and returning to Ottawa with product destined for cities all over North America. One of five short-line ventures owned by Chemin de Fer de Quebec, Ottawa Central began operating in December, taking over area short-line routes abandoned by Canadian National.

"We had a known customer base," says OCR general manager James Allen. "CN looked for its operations to be more competitive against giants in the U.S. and decided it couldn't service smaller customers. But rail service is back in Ottawa, and we want people to know who we are."

OCR will officially introduce itself to the community during an open house in September or October, he adds.

Until then, the public will have to be satisfied by occasionally seeing a jet-black OCR locomotive travelling on one of three regular routes: the weekday Ottawa-Pembroke, the Thursday-only Ottawa-Arnprior run, and the Sunday-to-Friday Ottawa-Coteau (Coteau is 20 kilometres west of Valleyfield, Que.) run.

For now, OCR picks up and delivers freight between area companies and CN's main line at Coteau. But the future could see it establishing a closed freight loop among area businesses, Mr. Allen predicts. A closed-loop service would require a substantial investment, including buying a fleet of cars to haul freight. All the cars pulled by OCR are leased from CN or Canadian Pacific by the customers.

But, even without that service, the benefits of a short-line outfit are beginning to show, he says. For example, OCR has some customers who need one car per month and CN couldn't accommodate them. Smaller operations can afford to do things that weren't cost effective for CN, Mr. Allen says, so, the 22-employee operation acts as an expanded fill-in, building on the old CN customer base. So far, 11,000 cars have been handled.

Seven 1,800-horsepower locomotives dating back to 1957 are the only rolling stock OCR owns. They were bought from CN, overhauled and updated with electronic systems before they began operating out of the Walkley Yard at the north end of Albion Road. The tracks outside the railyard are owned by CN, but all inspections and repairs are done by OCR. Regular maintenance on locomotives is performed in a small on-site workshop. Major repair work on the engines is done elsewhere.

The cars moved by the locomotives are left by CN at a railyard near its mainline at Coteau, about 110 kilometres east of Ottawa, to be retrieved at midnight by the local service. OCR uses the VIA passenger line to Montreal for most of the trip to Coteau. At the beginning, the short-line company attempted to run the train to Coteau during daylight hours, but switched to a night schedule after it discovered that yielding to passenger trains added several hours to the trip.

The 110 kilometres-an-hour top speed of their 1950s locomotives means they can't keep up with their passenger cousins and consequently, the engineers spent long periods stopped on sidetracks waiting for the faster VIA Rail trains to whiz past.

Once the train returns to Ottawa, the cars are separated into blocks destined for local delivery to either Pembroke or Arnprior. The trains then travel north up the Ottawa Valley, drop off the Coteau haul, and return with a fresh load of freight. The process ends where it began, with an OCR train leaving Ottawa at about 9 p.m. and following VIA tracks toward Montreal back to the CN mainline.

Not only are the engines old CN stock; most OCR employees are too, including Mr. Martin and Mr. Talbot, who began working together on the Pembroke train when OCR took over the route. Both agree working for a short-line outfit suits them better than the giant CN, especially the attitude of the operation.

"The smaller company encourages us to talk to the customers," says Mr. Martin who worked the same route for CN before moving to OCR. "When I was with CN, there was little one-on-one contact with customers."

The guys on the rails know what the customer's needs are and how to meet them, so it's not uncommon for the engineers and conductors to go to the bosses and tell them what to do, he explains. And, because the crews know as much about the customers as they do about the kids waving by the sides of the tracks, the bosses listen, Mr. Allen says. "If they want to talk about something, all they have to do is come into my office and sit down."

The customers appear to like the new attitude, too.

Ed Gutoskie takes care of shipping and warehousing for one of OCR bigger customers, Smurfit-Stone Container Canada Inc. of Port du Fort.

"The takeover by OCR has been a definite advantage from a service point of view."

Smurfit-Stone ships roughly 80 per cent of its product along OCR's lines, including pulp to companies such as Eastman Kodak Co. in Rochester, New York.

While truck rates are "competitive" with OCR and CN, most of his customers prefer to receive shipment by rail and that dictates his choice, he explains.

Part of the improvement for Smurfit-Stone is elimination of the CN bureaucracy that made simple communication difficult, he adds. The sheer size of CN meant there were multiple levels of approval for the smallest of change in service. With OCR he simply picks up the phone, calls Mr. Allen, and solves the problem in minutes. "Anyone who steered away from rail because of the service in the past should take another look."

Light rail project gets green light

By Zev Singer

The train has now left the station, although not quite on schedule.

Yesterday, by a 12-6 margin, Regional Council gave the go-ahead for the light rail "pilot project" that will activate eight kilometres of existing railroad tracks as a public transitway, which will be operated by OC Transpo rather than CP Rail, as originally proposed.

The route, originally expected to be in service before the end of this year, is now set to be in place by the summer of 2001. The eight-kilometre stretch will run from Bayview, near Lebreton Flats, to the South Keys shopping centre.

Council approved one-time costs of \$16 million and operating costs of \$394,000 for each of the next two years. According to the report put before council, the region will save \$5.4 million in capital costs and \$1.2 million in annual operating costs by implementing the railway under the control of OC Transpo.

In a long and heated debate, councillors argued over the economics of the plan.

There was consensus among councillors that there is a great necessity to reduce traffic congestion in the city by getting people out of cars and into public transit, but opinion varied drastically on the cheapest way to make that happen.

Supporters of the plan, among them Regional Chair Bob Chiarelli, argue that using existing track is much cheaper than extending bus transit-ways, which costs \$12 million per kilometre.

The entire capital investment in the eight-kilometre light rail project, by comparison, Mr. Chiarelli said, is only \$16 million.

"Anyone who says that the capital cost is too high is just misinformed," he added. Mr. Chiarelli also argued that federal and provincial money will likely one day be given to light rail, and this plan gives the region a foot in the door.

Yet opponents of the plan, like Councillor Gord Hunter, believe that logic is misleading because the long-term cost of the light rail rests in extending and building further rail lines. "It's time to bail on the rail," he said.

While supporters of the plan say riders find trains more comfortable and attractive than buses, opponents of the light rail plan say that not enough new riders will be added to justify the trains.

Councillor Molly McGoldrick-Larsen, for example, argued that people will still drive their cars downtown from the suburbs because there are still too many areas that lack bus access, and therefore would lack access to the light rail train stations.

"If you've got a leak in the roof," she said, "are you going to build an extension on the house? This is going to be a disaster."