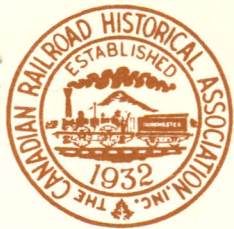


OAPS
Canadian
Rail

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Beloeil, June 29, 1864.

PRECISELY one hundred years ago this month, on June 29th, 1864, a special passenger train on the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, carrying three hundred and fifty German immigrants, went through an open drawbridge at the village of Beloeil, Que., thus precipitating Canada's worst railway accident. Ninety seven immigrants, the conductor and the locomotive fireman and, two days later, a curious onlooker, succumbed, carrying the death toll up to an even one hundred.

The passengers had come from Europe on the sailing vessel "Neckar", disembarked at Quebec, and were ferried to Levis where they were loaded on the ill-fated train, which consisted of two baggage cars, seven cars normally used for produce but temporarily fitted up for passengers, a second-class coach and a brake van. The train was pulled by the 4-4-0 locomotive "HAM", No. 168 of the G. T. R., a product of the works of D.C.Gunn at Hamilton. Special trains had depleted the supply of engine- and train-crew at Richmond, the intermediate divisional point between Levis and Montreal, and the locomotive foreman persuaded William Burney, a newly-promoted engine driver, to take the train to Montreal, even though he had never operated a locomotive over the section. Conductor, fireman and brakeman completed the crew.

Approaching the Richelieu River bridge between St. Hilaire and Beloeil at about 1:15 AM, the train failed to make a mandatory stop at the east end of the bridge, provided for in the Company rules. The engineer apparently failed to see the danger signal, indicating that the drawbridge was open, until it was too late, and the train plunged through the opening onto a barge which was being towed by a tugboat.

Help was dispatched immediately from Montreal, and the injured rushed to hospitals. Many succumbed as a result of their wounds, but among the survivors was the luckless engineman, Burney, who was arrested and made to stand trial at a coroner's inquest. He was found guilty of incompetence, but the railway was sharply criticized for lack of operating or mechanical examinations, laxness in the exercise of discipline, and lack of judgment on the part of its officers.

The unfortunate victims did not die in vain. In the aftermath of the terrible tragedy came badly-needed discipline, regulation of practice and operation, full and competent crews, and a host of mechanical improvements. It is said that the Beloeil accident was one of the factors which encouraged Westinghouse to develop and perfect his air brake. All of these developments have combined to give modern railway travel an enviable record for safety, proved by the fact that Canada's worst accident by far is now one hundred years behind us.