

All But Forgotten

99 railcars, a caboose and three engines of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company Train 263 departed the Harlowton, Montana rail yard on May 23, 1966 at 8:20 p.m., but never completed the trip. All four members of that train crew survived the wreck in Sixteen Mile Canyon, but today only one remains to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the derailment.

Jim Satake, 76, of Three Forks, has kept records and pictures of that night as well as other Milwaukee memorabilia. But a head injury caused his memories of the actual wreck to be lost forever. "I had a knot on the side of my head there, and Ringling is as far back as I remember. The order board should be dark at Ringling. I remember saying black board, I remember saying that to Del. He responded by saying "Yea, he's on a birthday, so there's no orders."

"You got Ringling, then a couple of stations, then Sixteen. And the next thing I know, Skornogoski's helping me out of the engine. I says, What the heck's going on, John?"

"Why you dumb son-of-bitch, you wrecked the train!"

But Skornogoski, in the caboose at the time of the derailment, had no idea as to the real cause of the Milwaukee's largest wreck up to that time. In fact, while the thirteen and a half hour formal investigation found fault with the crew, the real cause may never be found.

Engineer Del Hart, Conductor E. L. Eck, Rear Brakeman Jim Skornogoski and Head Breakman Jim Satake were all experienced railroaders at the time of the derailment. Excessive speed in the 10 degree curve with a downhill grade caused the three engines of the train to lay over on the outside of the curve, but Engineer Del Hart insisted that he had applied braking without result and had hopes that the train would hold to the track up until the last thirty seconds, when he threw the train into emergency braking. Little Joe No. E-78 left the track only 41 feet into the curve.



The lead engine, E78, on its side in the cut almost half-way through the curve.

In an electrified unit, there are two means to reduce speed. The primary means is to let the air pressure bleed off. A positive air pressure keeps the brakes off and acts as a deadman's switch if the air lines are punctured, which would immediately blow the air and apply the brakes. The other method is to "regenerate" which is, in essence, the opposite of "motoring" or drawing power from the grid. Regeneration "pushes" electricity into the grid and the resistance somewhat slows the engine.

Both Hart and Satake were still in the engine when Skornogoski arrived. Hart was trapped in the cab, but Skornogoski was able to get Satake to the ground.

"Then I started coming to then. Then I realized my back was sore Oh, man that thing hurt. He was trying to slide me off the engine, to get me down on the ground. And my back started hurting, that when I started coming-to. That was was 11 o'clock. Until daylight, 8 o'clock, I was out, plumb out."

Left - The engines and cars derailed in the first group.

Below - The cars derailed in the second portion of the train.



Hart, still in the cab, complained of being cold, so Skornogoski gathered the debris of telephone poles and built a fire nearby so that it reflected on the back of Del's head, enough to warm him. By the light of the bonfire, Skornogoski was able to free Hart's leg trapped between the seat, brake pedestal and control stand.

Meanwhile Eck walked back along the track about two miles to the station at Sixteen to a telephone. There was some difficulty in reaching the doctor in Three Forks, so the yard master in Harlo called out Dr. Jones. He was driven to Ringling, then put on the diesel engines of Train 261 and rode them west toward the wreck.

Dr. E. E. Bertagnolli, of Three Forks, was eventually reached and put on a trolley truck operated by Tom Fairhurst and headed east to the wreck. Bertagnolli arrived first. They were able to extract Hart from the cab and Bertagnolli administered first aid then loaded them on the truck and departed for the hospital at about 3:30 am. The engines of Train 261 arrived on the east end of the wreck about the time the trolley truck left.

The train, originally about a mile long, was now only 6/10th of a mile long. The two electric's E-78 and E-73 and the diesel booster No. 263 were laid out on the north side of the curve. Directly behind them, 24 cars were compacted into a 300 foot space. The next 22 cars were upright and on the track, followed by another 26 cars crunched into a 353 foot area. The last 27 cars and the caboose were upright and on the rails. It was a mess.

Jim's brother, John, was a member of the clean-up crew and it was a week before he could visit Jim in the hospital. Jim's sacrum (triangular bone at the base of the spine) had been impacted by something sharp and caused an unseparated break. It was eight months before Jim could get back to work. Although he had been dismissed from service in July 1966, he was eventually reinstated and worked on the Milwaukee until they pulled up the track in 1980.

This strange configuration of wrecked and un-wrecked cars, a spontaneous uncoupling at the Hamen station, placement of a lighter rail on the outside of the 10 degree curve, combined with no working speedometer in the lead engine could all have contributed to the wreck that night. And 40 years after the fact, little can be gained by rehashing the evidence or laying blame. We can marvel, that in this case, a derailment was only a brief obstacle on the tracks of the crew's lives.

Top Right - E-78 and E-73 after they were uprighted and brought into the Harlowton yard.

Middle Right - two views of the railcars crammed into the cut behind the engines.

Left - Jim Satake, May 2006 by Patrick Finnegan

Other photos in this article courtesy of Jim Satake

