

Search for locomotive still on track

BY IAN SCOTT

Contrary to some published reports, the search for a steam locomotive that plunged into the St. John River more than a century ago has not been derailed. Call it the case of the little engine that hasn't yet surfaced.

Eric Ouellette, a local civil engineer has spearheaded an attempt to find the remains of Canadian Pacific Railway locomotive 508. On June 21, 1900, the 508 and its rail cars were headed eastbound when the bridge they were crossing collapsed, sending the train into the river below at Grand Falls.

Ouellette first learned of the ill-fated locomotive three years ago. After seeing a picture of the collapsed bridge in a book, he was intrigued enough to begin researching the accident. With so much time passed since the accident, there were holes and inconsistencies in the information he was able to gather. And with no eyewitnesses alive to share recollections, the story remained as murky as the water at the bottom of the river.

"Everybody's an expert on what happened," said Ouellette. "When I first started this, I did a lot of research just talking to people. Some say, 'You're wasting your time.' Some say 'It's there.' There's optimistic people and there's negative people. Maybe the negative people are right; I don't know."

But count Ouellette in as a believer. Through a third party, Ouellette learned a group of divers from Moncton had found the locomotive resting on its side at the bottom of the river, in the fall of 2000. That information, coupled with a lack of documentation regarding the salvage or recovery of the locomotive, has Ouellette convinced it's still resting in its watery grave.

Five attempts by dive teams to find the locomotive have been made since May 24 of this year. The divers have recovered pieces of rail, steel spikes and parts possibly from the locomotive, but the steam engine remains hidden for now. Magnetometer scans of the river have been done at the location where the train was deemed to have ended up. Ouellette says the readings from those scans would indicate there is the presence of heavy metal debris; possibly the long-lost locomotive.

Ouellette's interest in the locomotive peaked earlier this year when he was informed by Department of Transportation inspectors that a large crane and barge would be in Grand Falls for work on the new bridge crossing the Trans-Canada Highway. The barge, equipped with a 230-ton crane, could be instrumental in raising the sunken engine if its location could be pinpointed. Records show the 508 weighed in at 35 tons.

"It's plenty of what's needed," said Ouellette. "It's the Cadillac of the tools that you'd need to do this."

Though the barge and crane may only be in town for a few more weeks, Ouellette said there is no specific deadline for recovering the engine.

"There's other ways to take that train out of the river when the barge goes," said Ouellette. "If we don't find it before the barge leaves, it's not a done deal yet. If we do find it before that, and it does come up to the day that we do take it out, they plan on doing that on a Saturday, for the public to be able to come and see that."

While Ouellette admits the search for the 508 has taken up a lot of time and effort, he isn't ready to throw in the towel. He says the town has benefited from the search, with national media picking up the story, effectively putting Grand Falls on the map. But to Ouellette, the real story won't surface until the locomotive does.

"It would be a big day for the town," Ouellette said wistfully. "I'd like to see the amount of people on the shore checking that out."

Ouellette hopes the public will embrace his plan to salvage the 508, if and when it is found. He says he hopes the salvage of the locomotive can be accomplished with private funding, so the community can then approach the provincial government for assistance in its restoration. While a number of communities have restored locomotives on display—such as Canadian National engine 5780, located in Moncton's Centennial Park—nowhere is there one that has spent more time underwater than the littlest mermaid.

"If we raise \$50,000 to get the locomotive out, that's going to raise how much times over that amount of money back to the town? The locomotive could be here forever. It's going to outlive us, for sure."



Up from the deep

Eric Ouellette holds one of two pieces of cast iron found at the bottom of the St. John River in Grand Falls. The pieces were found by divers in the latest attempt to locate Canadian Pacific Railway locomotive 508. The steam engine and its rail cars plunged into the river in the summer of 1900, when a train bridge collapsed. Ouellette has been researching the accident and feels the pieces are part of the ill-fated train. (Scott photo)