

Railway bridge collapse in 1900 still stirs interest

A local history buff and professional engineer, Eric Ouellette is attempting to satisfy his own curiosity as to some extent, but he has also left many others wondering if a CPR locomotive could still be resting at the bottom of the St. John River in Grand Falls, following the collapse of a railway bridge on June 21, 1900.

Last fall, Ouellette received a copy of Margaret Marceau's book entitled "Grand Falls Yesterdays" for his birthday.

"Mrs. Marceau was fond of Grand Falls history and dedicated much of her life documenting historical events in the area," stated Ouellette. "Needless to say, it's a very addictive book for people interested in our town's past. While reading it, I came upon one very interesting event that occurred back in 1900. There are plenty of eventful moments described in the book but this specific event caught my interest. When I came to the railroad section of the book, I saw a picture of an old collapsed railway bridge on the St. John River. What was interesting about this photo was that there was a train on it at the time of the accident! This photo showed most of the train submerged with the remainder dangling from the top of the pier."

A few weeks ago, Ouellette and a co-worker were talking to a couple of Department of Transportation (DOT) inspectors.

"We started speaking about old trains. I had the book in my truck so I went to get it. I wanted to show them the photo of the collapsed bridge thinking they might find it interesting. I mentioned that some of the local rumours suggest it was never salvaged and was still at the bottom of the St. John River. I also told them that a local resident reported that, years ago, two men were diving and exploring the bottom of the river in search of it. He even went on to say that before they left, they had found it. The bridge he was referring to isn't the one that is currently being used as part of the NB Trail walk/snowmobile trail. This older bridge was located closer to the dam than the current one. This bridge crossed the river approximately where the town's municipal garage stands on one side and behind the new Canadian Tire store at the river's edge on the other side. One of the DOT inspectors also mentioned that a huge barge was coming to the area this summer. The barge is needed in order to complete the work currently being done on the former Trans Canada Highway bridge crossing the St. John River. We all agreed it would be nice to see the old locomotive taken out of the river and perhaps even restored as a tourist attraction (if applicable). The barge could possibly be available for salvaging the locomotive because of its close proximity several hundred metres upriver. A barge of this capacity with a 250-ton crane doesn't come along every year."

Ouellette first needed to do a little investigating before proceeding.

"I needed to find out if the locomotive still there or if it had been salvaged. If it was still there, was a salvage effort worth pursuing? I tackled my second question first. I needed to know if this was going to intrigue some of the town's more influential people in order to stand any chance of materializing."

Ouellette continued his research to find out if salvaging the locomotive was worth pursuing. "I talked to about a dozen people over the last few days wanting to know from them what they thought of this idea so far. I told them of my plans to find out the facts of the event and also asked them, if needed, would they help me form a committee dedicated in trying to raise money for salvaging and perhaps even restoring it. I'm glad to say that all of the people I've approached have been fully cooperative and have accepted to help me. Most of them were a little skeptical at first because it happened 103 years ago. I decided to attack my first issue if the "stories" of the locomotive being salvaged or not were true or false. It should be noted that there were also reports from some residents, stating that the locomotive was probably removed from the river, but which ones are fact and which are fiction?"

The more Ouellette read about the accident, the more intriguing it became. The following was taken from Mrs. Marceau's article, which contained some extra text, which due to cost reasons, did not make it to the book's final printing.

"We paused for several minutes in our stroll along the beach to look at the cribwork and abutments of the old railway bridge. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that the railway bridge was not always where it is now, though I had vaguely noted that in old pictures of the town, the railway bridge seemed much nearer. Several people had remarked to me that the bridge actually collapsed twice, so the other day when I had a spare moment I looked it up. The railway reached Grand Falls in 1877 and work on this first bridge was completed the following year. It was of course at that

time the New Brunswick Railway. The first bridge collapse was in 1896 when part of it washed away during the spring freshet in April. Rebuilding was completed by midsummer and I believe at this time the site chosen was slightly upriver with a firmer rock base, though the river at the new site was slightly wider than the one originally chosen. Four

years later, the bridge collapsed again."

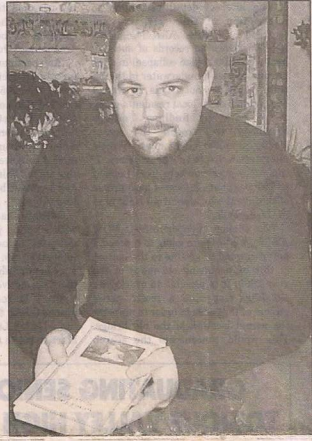
At this point, Mrs. Marceau quotes the following from *The Story of Old N.B. Railways*. "On the 21st of June, 1900, the bridge over the St. John River at Grand Falls fell when the train from Edmundston was crossing. The train crashed into twenty feet of water. The engineer was Walter Matthews; fireman,

William McCluskey; brakeman, Gabri Potras; baggageman, Archille Pelletier; as the conductor was Charles Henderson. The locomotive was CPR No. 508. The following account of the accident appeared in *The Railway News*, June 28th, 1900:

See Railroad.....page



Over 100 years ago Collapse of the CPR railway bridge crossing the St. John River on June 21, 1900.



Eric Ouellette

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Railroad.....from page 3

"The terrible accident which occurred at Grand Falls, N.B. on Thursday by the sinking of the CPR railway bridge has so far, we are happy to state, been unattended by loss of life, although Hiram I. Smith, traveler for T. McAvity and Sons, Saint John, James McKenna, traveling passenger agent of the CPR and conductor Henderson of the CPR train went through the bridge were very seriously injured."

"There were six passengers in the car at the time of the accident: Hiram Smith; James McKenna; J. O'Neil, an Englishman who is buying lumber in New Brunswick; Dr. C.A. Kirkpatrick of Woodstock; Miss Kierstead of Moncton, N.S., who was returning home from school; and Harry Henderson, the auditor of the Dominion Express Co. The train which broke through the bridge was made up of seven freight, one first class, and a combination baggage car which went down with the broken span. The locomotive with Engineer Matthews and Fireman McCluskey in the cab sank to the bottom. Neither of them knew how they escaped, but did so almost without a scratch. Mr. McKenna is one of the most seriously injured, one of his arms and one finger are broken, and he is hurt internally, but at the last report was improving."

"Smith was severely crushed but no bones broken. Miss Kierstead escaped with a scratched hand. Dr. Kirkpatrick had a cut head. Mr. O'Neil had his left side injured and an arm and ankle sprained. The river where the accident occurred is twenty feet deep and the level of the bridge twenty-five feet above water. Friday night about 10 o'clock, a CPR engine with crew left Temiscouata Railway to Edmundston and from there over the CPR to the bridge. This engine will assist in transfer of passengers and freight at the Edmundston side of the bridge and assist in raising the wreckage."

"I was told at the time by Ralph Kirkpatrick that there was a seventh passenger on the train, presumably unknown to the others. He was a tramp that had hitched a ride and at first, on finding himself in the water, did not dare cry for help for fear of being discovered. He was lucky enough to get hold of timber from the train's cargo, but as he was carried down river toward the falls, one of his fears overcame the other. He began to cry for help and was rescued before he reached the brink of the falls. Unluckily, it being June, the rush of water was less than it would have been earlier in the spring when nothing might have saved him."

"So already there is mention of salvage efforts but why did Mrs. Marceau find nothing on it?" Ouellette wondered. "Back in 1900, such a retrieval project would certainly have been of interest to local residents or at least documented somewhere for her to

discover. Apparently Mrs. Marceau could never find out if the locomotive was removed from the river or not. "The level of detail pertaining to locomotive No. 508 were in the works but after further inspection of the damage and the complexity of such work, it was scrapped for cost and/or feasibility reasons and left there? Back in those days, heavy equipment necessary to salvage a 35-ton (77,000 lbs.) locomotive wasn't easily available like it is today. Furthermore, how did they get it out even if they had such equipment? No one in their right minds would set up a crane on the edge of a collapsed span to retrieve a considerably damaged locomotive and risk causing another disaster. Did they drag it out to shore and if so, with what?"

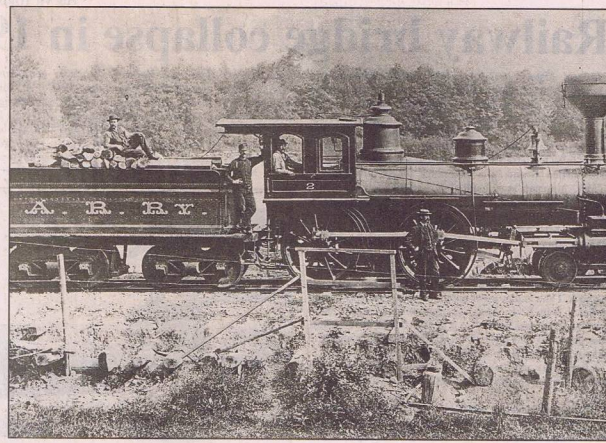
So it would seem that the next logical step would be to try to contact somebody from the CPR archives that might be able to assist in Ouellette's search. After a few hours of searching the internet for contact names and phone numbers, he found a CPR corporate historian listed on the website and contacted him via phone in Calgary. Ouellette asked him to search historical documents for locomotive No. 508.

"He did confirm to me, by fax, that the locomotive in question had indeed served in this area," Ouellette said.

"He wrote *Here's what we know of locomotive No. 508: The 4-4-0 standard type locomotive was built in 1885 at Manchester Locomotive Works in Manchester, New Hampshire for the New Brunswick Railway (NBR) for their locomotive No. 34. After CPR took over the NBR in a 990 year lease, July 1, 1890, CPR renumbered the locomotive to No. 508 in September 1890. CPR must have fished the locomotive out of the river, because it continued to serve CPR until being disposed (likely scrapped) in February 1910. But this only after it was modified and renumbered as CPR locomotive No. 62 in November 1908. We have the locomotive assignments for July 31, 1904. Locomotive No. 508 was assigned to and maintained out of Edmundston, N.B."* Ouellette noted.

"I started thinking that maybe a 100-year-old document could be wrong. It might have been locomotive No. 508 or some kind of typo like that. I called him back when I got home that night and this time asked him to look for local locomotives of that era which were scrapped in 1900. He did find one that had been scrapped in 1901. This could perhaps correlate with our sunken locomotive if they had plans on retrieving it but abandoned the idea later on and officially scrapped it in their 1901 records. This would explain why Mrs. Marceau did not find any documentation on the event."

Ouellette also learned that in British Columbia, a sunken locomotive



A similar locomotive

This is a photo of an early type of steam locomotive which traveled the Saint John River valley in 1900. The locomotive, which is believed to be resting at the bottom of the river, is similar to this one.

time in a lake was included in CPR records which also show it as being scrapped and not lost or abandoned.

"The level of detail pertaining to information of this sort was not recorded back then. Also, locomotive No. 508 shows no records of such an incident (1900 bridge collapse) in CPR records. Is it still underwater in the St. John River or not? This is why I decided to inform local residents going public with my findings. Perhaps somebody will recall the event (unlike) and/or might have valuable information to solve the mystery. If this story goes nowhere from here, it will at least have informed local people of this event which occurred right here in Grand Falls."

"The window of opportunity is NOW if salvage efforts are going to proceed. I am interested in getting to the bottom of this by acquiring old maps of the year 1900. It is possible to overlay an old 1900 map onto a recent aerial picture of that area in order to pinpoint the actual location of the old bridge. This would concentrate the search efforts for divers if it is still there. I talked to some local divers and one of them even offered to search for it on his personal time for a couple days. That is why the search area should be targeted as best as possible before proceeding," Ouellette stated.

"Any pertinent information would be greatly appreciated. Please fax me at (506) 473-6905 or e-mail me at work.gentec@mb.sibn.com or at home.ericr13@mbn.nb.ca. Leave your name and phone number for me to call when I get home. It would be appreciated if calls were not made directly to the office. This is a personal project and I cannot be contacted at work on this subject."

Ouellette has also built a webpage with a voting poll question and extra material is added regularly. Those interested can view his webpage at www.gentec.nb.ca. Once there, click on the "Locomotive 508" link.

Mrs. Marceau's book can be purchased for \$25 at the Merritt Press Ltd., Lucky Luke's and Dave's Mini Mart stores in Grand Falls.

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Horoscope

Week of March 16 to 23, 2003

Aries
You are currently going through a period in which all the pieces of the puzzle are starting to fall in place. You know what is important for you, so don't be afraid to go after it.

Taurus
You are now able to be more confident about your financial situation, but you still crave lots of positive reinforcement from those around you.

Gemini
You are finally starting to see your true worth, and this will help you grow as a person. This is a very important time in your life.

Cancer
Jupiter's influence is giving you everything you need to reach your goals with great enthusiasm and energy. You know what you want and you have every right to be proud of yourself.

Leo
You see everything in a positive light and you know how to turn a bad situation into a good one. You also need to know that others have great faith in you.

Virgo
Mercury's influence is causing you to be scattered in all directions, but exhausting as this may be, you are heading toward incredible things. You'll also be able to see things with incredible clarity.

Libra
You now know what is important to you, so it's time to go after it. Wasting time on useless things will only cause you grief.

Scorpio
You've headed in a direction that