



Steve Johnston surveys damaged boxcar on family's farm
Advance Photo - M. Buttars

Thousands of people clamored close to the burning carnage of steel freight cars in Mountain Saturday for a better glimpse of the 24-unit train derailment, but the Johnston family had seen far more than they cared to.

Their 350-acre farm, divided by two east and westbound CP rail lines, caught the brunt of the fiery train wreck. One of the boxcars stopped just 20 metres short of Arnold Johnston's farmhouse and an automated steel railway shack, used to control the crossing signals on County Road 3, was uprooted and pulled along by the speeding train towards the Johnstons' home. Only a sturdy maple tree in front of the house halted the flying object.

Although there was no structural damage to the Johnston property, a few acres of farmland were rendered useless by Saturday's accident.

Johnston's 30-year-old son Steve was in the barn preparing the 50-head dairy cattle herd for the morning milking when the 7 a.m. crash took place. He watched stupefied as car after car skidded into the pile of growing debris.

"I saw it but the part of it was...I couldn't believe it," Steve confessed later.

"You'd swear somebody had dropped a bomb."

It was all over in a matter of minutes but the swirling dust took much longer to clear.

"It was like night, with all the dirt and ground flying," recalled Steve's mother Marion. She had been awakened by a crunching noise that "just got louder and louder". Her initial reaction was to alert 12-year-old daughter Lori and transport her, along with an eight-month-old grandchild the Johnstons' babysat for daughter Marilyn back to the baby's mother's place half a mile away.

After running to the house to ensure his family was safe, Steve was forced to turn

the herd of cattle out to pasture. Dust had infiltrated the barn and the nervous animals started kicking and jumping.

"If I lost the barn that was bad enough," Steve said. "I didn't want to lose the cows."

Flames soon ignited in the bludgeoned boxcars, some of which were empty. In one car, cleaning products in aerosol cans kept popping and soon littered the field like tiny missiles.

Marion Johnston said the South Mountain fire department was on the scene immediately and Canadian Pacific railway officials arrived soon afterward.

A spokesman from the Winchester detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police said for almost an hour and a half from the time of the derailment, CPR officials were unsure if toxic chemicals were contained in the freight cars. Two tankers were marked 'sulphuric acid'. It was later discovered they were empty and chemical residue left on tanker walls was considered insufficient to fuel a blaze.

Spectators, many whom had heard radio reports of the disaster, came in droves to Mountain.

At first they were just neighbours, said Marion Johnston. By Sunday the faces in the crowd belonged mostly to strangers, some professing to have come from Ottawa, Kingston, Smiths Falls and even New York. They came equipped with pocket instamatic cameras, and swarmed freely across the Johnston property.

A lot of people brought lawn chairs, babies and bottles," said another married daughter in the Johnston clan, 31-year-old Carol Ann Arcand.

They trampled flowerbeds and sat on the edge of the family swimming pool in search of a better view, bending the pool's steel beam reinforcements. Young Lori remembered people walking up to the front veranda and peering in the windows.

CPR's security force would have kept people away from the farm if they felt there was imminent danger to their welfare, explained the Winchester OPP spokesman.

Incredibly, nobody was injured in the train mishap. Had the locomotive derailed 20 metres before it did, the Johnston farmhouse could have suffered severe damages. Had the smash-up taken place a quarter of a mile before its eventual resting spot most of Mountain village would almost certainly have been obliterated.

Gladys Imrie, whose husband George operates the Imrie Fuel Supplies delivery business, said two tank trucks parked at their Main Street home just west of the Johnston residence had been filled with oil the previous evening. They contained about 12,000 gallons of the fuel.

Additional fuel was stored in an underground gas tank.

"We would have never known what would have happened," Gladys Imrie stated simply considering the consequences of a train derailment under different circumstances.

"We're very fortunate."

Joey Whittaker, owner of the Stage West Restaurant in Mountain, thought "everyone was just so relieved" nobody had been hurt in the incident.

"I thought we'd all have to be evacuated," she said. "That was on everyone's mind that morning."

As though it were an emotional outlet, people poured into the streets to witness the mutilated remnants of a train.

"It reminded me of living in a tourist village," said Whittaker, describing the scene. "I walked outside that evening and there were hundreds and hundreds of people. It was a zoo."

Nevertheless, it was great for business, and the village's only restaurant was "jammed" until close to 10 o'clock Saturday evening.

cause

Timing and a combination of conditions resulted in an empty freight car jumping CPR tracks and causing 23 more cars to derail in Mountain July 10, says a Canadian Transport Commission spokesman.

Peter Schnobb emphasized these were the findings of a preliminary investigation and that further examination into the accident would take place.

A broken axle indicated two wheels of the empty 'gondola' car had bounced off the track. Centrifugal force caused by a curve in the rail line, exaggerated motion in the unweighted car and speed of the train, which was well beneath the freight-carrying limit, together formulated a momentary bouncing motion that brought the derailment of train No. 918.

"It's something that, unfortunately, is inherent in the system," said Schnobb.

The clean-up and investigation long complete, the cause of the accident, according to officials of the Canadian Transport Commission, has been attributed to timing and a combination of conditions. A broken axle indicated two wheels of the empty "gondola" car bounced off the track first. Centrifugal forces caused by a curve in the rail line, coupled with exaggerated motion in the unweighted car and the

train's speed resulted in a motion that bounced No. 918 off the tracks.

The train was travelling at two-thirds of its freight capacity, carrying grain, general merchandise, automotive parts, and a flammable wax substance which kept fire departments from Mountain, Kemptville and Winchester busy throughout the day and night Saturday.

Estimated speed of the train when it left the tracks was 80 km/h.