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How Engineer Hutchinson Stuck To His Post A Forgotten Story of a Brave Engineer

by Fred Angus

The westbound express of the Grand Trunk Railway approached Burlington, Ontario soon after 3 o'clock in the afternoon of Tuesday, March 1, 1898. The train had left Toronto at 2:00 and was due at Hamilton at 3:25. At the throttle was Thomas Hutchinson, aged 57, a veteran of 36 years service with the Grand Trunk and its predecessor the Great Western. Ahead of him was a freight train which was supposed to go into a siding to let the express pass. The switch was protected by a semaphore which had a red target indicating danger if the switch was set for the siding. The caboose of the freight train was painted bright red, the same colour as the semaphore target, and by chance the two were in exactly the same line of sight as seen from the engine of the oncoming express. Because of the light conditions that afternoon, the semaphore was virtually invisible against the background of the similarly coloured caboose. The result was a recipe for disaster.

Believing that the freight was safely in the siding and the line was clear, engineer Hutchinson maintained scheduled speed until within a few hundred feet of the train ahead. Then, according to fireman Clark of the express, he noticed that something was wrong, and that the switch had not been set back for the main line. Both realized that it was too late to stop and a crash was inevitable, the only question was how severe would it be. There was still time to jump and perhaps escape with little injury, but engineer Hutchinson instantly decided to stay at his post. In the few remaining seconds he threw the engine into reverse and applied the heavy emergency brakes which immediately took hold and began to slow the train. However the momentum of the heavy train pushed it on relentlessly, and seconds later it crashed into and demolished the caboose, derailed the engine and trapped engineer and firemen in the wreckage. Both were rescued alive and taken to the hospital in Hamilton. Fireman Clark survived, but engineer Hutchinson died of his injuries on Wednesday evening, March 2. However his self-sacrifice was not in vain. Before the crash the passenger train had slowed to the point where most of the cars stayed upright and were not seriously damaged. It was the opinion of Grand Trunk officials that

had the collision taken place at track speed, it is almost certain that the wooden passenger cars would have telescoped and at least half the passengers would have been killed, and the rest badly injured. Thanks to air brakes, and Engineer Hutchinson's heroic last stand, Canada was spared what might have been one of the worst wrecks in its history.

Thomas Hutchinson was born in Ireland in 1841, and came to Canada in the mid 1850s. In 1862 he joined the Great Western Railway as a fireman, and in 1869 was promoted to engineer. When the Great Western was taken over by the Grand Trunk in 1882 he became a GTR employee and continued in his duties as engineer until his death, a total of

29 years, during which he was promoted from yard service, to freights, and eventually to the express passenger trains, the best the GTR ran.

The job of locomotive engineer was a very dangerous occupation in the 19th century, but Thomas Hutchinson seems to have had more than his share of close brushes with death. He fully realized the dangers but often said that, in the event of an accident, he would stay at his post until the end. He saw and

survived a considerable number of wrecks in which men alongside of him were killed. One day in the 1890s he was engineer of the Toronto Express when it crashed into a freight on the Wye at Hamilton, killing his fireman, Robert Archibald, as well as baggageman Peden. On this occasion, Hutchinson stayed with the engine until the crash, when he was thrown over the tops of two locomotives and through the open door of a boxcar in front. Landing in a pile of wheat, he was buried up to the neck; however he was dug out almost uninjured! Another time he was engineer of the second locomotive of a double-header which was wrecked at the Welland Canal. Thomas Cox, engineer of the first locomotive, was killed, but Hutchinson survived. The most bizarre, and potentially disastrous, situation occurred when he was driving the engine of a holiday train consisting of twelve coaches, all full of passengers. While running along a high embankment, one of the big driving wheels broke loose, fell off the engine and rolled down the embankment into the ditch. Even engineer Hutchinson could not explain the miracle

Stuck to His Post.

**Engineer Hutchinson's Bravery
Saved Many Lives.**

Sketch of the Hero Who Died in Hamilton Hospital on Wednesday Night.

The headline in the "London Advertiser" of March 4, 1898 which described the tragic events of the previous Tuesday.



Grand Trunk Railway 4-4-0 No. 2042 was built by Manchester Locomotive Works in August 1873 as No. 186. It received a new boiler in December 1882 and was renumbered 472 in 1898. Subsequently renumbered 270 (in 1904) and 2042 (in 1910), it was scrapped in May 1917. Collection of Donald Angus

that followed. Somehow he managed to stop the train, just at the edge of a high trestle, and not one person, of the hundreds aboard the train, was even hurt.

After all these narrow escapes, it is no wonder that he always thought that death would come to him while driving his beloved engine. On Sunday, February 27, 1898, he put on a new suit of clothes before going to service at Christ Church Cathedral in Hamilton. Possibly he had some premonition, for he remarked to his family that he would probably be buried in that suit. This prediction proved all too true. Two days later, on March 1, he took his last ride aboard his engine, and the following Friday was indeed buried in the new suit.

In the last century and a half many hundreds of railroaders have died in the line of duty while serving the railways of Canada. Most are now completely forgotten. Four years ago we told the story of Joseph Birse who died in a spectacular plunge of an express engine off the Lachine wharf. There are many parallels with the present story. Both wrecks occurred in the 1890s, and train speeds were being increased to unprecedented levels at the same time as trains were getting longer. Both engineers were long-time employees of the Grand Trunk, and both displayed the highest type of heroism and courage, saving the lives of their passengers at the expense of their own. In both cases the engineer was the only fatality in what could have been a major disaster. Stories like this are a vital part of railway history, and it is one of the duties of historians to see that people like Thomas Hutchinson are never forgotten.

GRAND TRUNK RAILWAY SYSTEM

TORONTO TO HAMILTON

Miles	STATIONS	31	33	35	37	39	41	43	45	47
	<i>Eastern Time</i>	Exp. Da'ly	Acm. ex. Sun.	Buff. ex. Sun.	Exp. Da'ly	Mall. ex. Sun.	Exp. ex. Sun.	Exp. ex. Sun.	Chic. ex. Sun.	Sub. Wed. Sat.
.....	Montreal (see page 10).....▲	Leave	P.M. 10 25	P.M. 10 25	A.M. 7 05	P.M. 4 25	P.M. 5 30	P.M. 7 00	P.M. 9 15	P.M. 1 00
0	Toronto (Union Station).....▲	b 7 25	f 7 35	f 9 05	* 8 00	f 4 25	f 5 30	f 7 00	f 9 15	a 1 00
0.48	Brock Street.....		7 40		2 05	4 30		7 05	10 25	1 05
0.83	Bathurst Street Jet.....		7 44	9 12	2 08	4 34	5 39	7 09	10 29	1 10
2.63	South Parkdale.....	x 7 32				4 38				
4.49	Swansea.....									
5.00	The Hummer.....									
6.45	Mimico.....		7 52		2 16	4 42	5 37	7 17	10 36	1 17
7.33	New Toronto.....		7 54							1 20
8.83	Long Branch.....	f 7 56			f 4 45	5 41	f 7 21	s		1 23
10.77	Rifle Ranges.....	f 7 59			f 2 23					1 26
12.89	Port Credit.....	f 8 02			f 2 26	4 52	5 47	7 27	10 47	1 30
14.84	Lorne Park.....	f 8 05			f 2 29		5 51	f 7 30	10 50	k 1 34
15.91	Clarkson's.....	f 8 07			f 2 35	4 58		f 7 33		k 1 38
21.16	Oakville.....	8 15	9 43	2 48	5 08	6 00	7 43	11 03		
25.40	Bronte.....	8 29		2 56	5 17		7 52			
31.71	Burlington Crossing.....									
31.80	Burlington.....	8 43	f 9 58	3 08	5 27		8 03			
34.63	Waterdown.....	8 50		3 14	5 32		8 07			
38.85	Hamilton.....▲	8 28	9 00	10 10	3 25	5 39	6 30	8 15	11 35	
.....	Niagara Falls.....▲	f 11 20	f 11 00	f 11 24	* 4 45	f 7 25	f 8 00	P.M.	f 7 25	
.....	Suspension Bridge.....	11 10	11 10	11 30	4 53	7 35	8 10		7 45	
.....	Buffalo (Erie R.R.).....	12 30	12 30	12 30	5 55				8 55	
.....	Buffalo (N.Y.C.).....	12 30	12 30	12 30	6 05	8 55	8 55		9 05	
.....	London.....▲	* 11 20	* 11 20		f 6 45	f 9 50	f 9 50		2 30	
.....	Detroit (see page 14).....▲	* 1 40	* 1 40		9 30				6 45	
.....	Port Huron.....▲	* 11 55			* 7 55				3 50	
.....	Chicago (see page 12).....▲	* 9 10			* 6 30				1 50	
	Arrive	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.	A.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.	P.M.

a No. 47 runs on Wednesdays and Saturdays only.

b No. 31 stops at South Parkdale on Sunday and Monday only.

c Will not stop on Sunday at intermediate stations except So. Parkdale and Burlington.

k Runs Saturdays only.

m No. 45 will stop at South Parkdale only on Sunday.

s Stops Saturdays only.

x Stops Sundays and Mondays only.

No. 31. Express, leaving Toronto 7.25 a.m. daily. Pullman Vestibule Sleeping Car, Boston to Chicago, via B. & M., C. V. and G. T. Ry. Sys. daily except Sunday from Boston, and daily from Montreal.

No. 33. Accommodation, leaving Toronto 7.35 a.m. daily except Sunday. Parlor Car Toronto to Hamilton and Through Coaches Toronto to Suspension Bridge, daily except Sunday.

No. 35. Buffalo Express, leaving Toronto 9.05 a.m. daily except Sunday. Wagner Parlor Car from Toronto to Buffalo, via G.T. and N.Y.C. & H.R. Ry. Sys. daily except Sunday.

No. 37. Accommodation, leaving Toronto at 9.00 p.m. daily. Parlor Car, Toronto to Hamilton, daily. Pullman Buffet Parlor Car, Toronto to Detroit on Sunday only. Pullman Buffet Sleeping Car, Toronto to New York, via G.T. and L.V. Ry. Sys. on Sunday only. Wagner Buffet Sleeping Car, Toronto to New York via G.T. and W.S. Ry. Sys. on Sunday only.

No. 39. Mail, leaving Toronto at 4.25 p.m. daily except Sunday. Parlor Car, Toronto to Hamilton.

No. 41. Express, leaving Toronto at 5.20 p.m. daily except Sunday. Pullman Buffet Vestibule Sleeping Car, Toronto to New York, via G.T. and L.V. Ry. Sys. daily except Sunday. Wagner Buffet Sleeping Car, Toronto to New York, via G.T. and W.S. Ry. Sys. daily except Sunday, and on Sunday these cars leave Toronto on No. 37. Through Coaches, Toronto to London and Toronto to Brantford, and St. Thomas, via Hamilton and Harrisburg.

No. 43. Express, leaving Toronto at 7.00 p.m. daily except Sunday. Parlor Car, Toronto to Hamilton.

No. 45. Express, leaves Toronto at 10.20 p.m. daily. Pullman Sleeping Car, Toronto to Detroit via Port Huron, daily. Pullman Sleeping Car, Montreal to Chicago, daily. Through Coach, Toronto to Chicago, daily.

This schedule, from the Grand Trunk system timetable of October 5, 1896, shows the trains running between Toronto and Hamilton. It is believed that it was train 37 that collided with the freight on March 1, 1898, although accounts of the accident differ.