Memorial for 2006 derailment victims unveiled

Lillooet – Rail employees past and present unveiled a memorial to two trainmen who died in a 2006 derailment last Thursday afternoon at Downton Park beside the museum.

John Holliday, general chairman of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, spoke first. He recounted the story of CN Engine 9606.

On June 29, 2006, the engine, with one lumber car attached, was heading back to Lillooet for the night. The train derailed when the brakes on the car and locomotive failed to control the train's descent down the winding tracks and steep grade of the mountains.

The train car derailed first, eventually coming to rest 1,000 feet down the mountain. Soon after, the locomotive also derailed and slid about 800 feet down.

Conductor Don Faulkner and brakeman Tom Dodd both died. Gordon Rhodes, the engineer, survived but was badly injured.

The report from the federal Transportation Safety Board (TSB), released last May, blamed inadequate brakes for the accident.

The board noted that CN did not perform a risk assessment before removing engines with "dynamic braking", better suited for the mountains than CN Engine 9606, from the route.

Dodd and Faulkner's fellow union members volunteered to build the memorial with the support of the District of Lillooet.

The volunteers erected a stone cairn topped with the bell of CN Engine 9606, salvaged from the wreck.

Rocks for the cairn were collected from the banks of the Thompson River.

Holliday gave "a big thanks to retired conductor and master stonemason Clive Casey" for doing the cairn's stonework.

Former district councillor Marg Lampman delivered a statement on behalf of the local member of the federal Parliament, Chuck Strahl.

Harry Lali, the provincial member of the legislative assembly for the area, then spoke.

"As we remember Tom and Don…I would also like to point out how close Gordon Rhodes came to losing his life," he said.
He added that Rhodes’s survival was key to finding out the truth about what happened in the train’s final moments.

Both Lali and Lampman cited the importance of workplace safety in light of the accident.

“We remember Tom and Don and at the same time, we hope for the safety of all workers,” said Lali.

Later, in an interview, he added, “TSB squarely laid the blame on faulty, inadequate equipment.”

He urged the federal government to enact tougher safety standards in the transport industry and enforce existing regulations more diligently.

“Transport Canada should do their jobs.

“The ball’s squarely in the federal Ministry of Transportation’s lap.”

Lali also said that the province is partly responsible as well in that it sold B.C. Rail but did not ensure that CN upheld the former’s safety standards.

Holliday expressed similar sentiments in an interview in the wake of the TSB report’s release.

He said of CN’s safety policy, “They only do what’s required by law.

“What’s needed is a change in the law.

“I would like to see Transport Canada have more teeth.”

Holliday added that the union has long demanded adherence to B.C. Rail’s more stringent standards.

“We have been working since Day One when CN bought B.C. Rail.”

But, he said, the railway was unlikely to act unless safety issues begin to hurt profits.

“Safety in the transportation industry is compromised by the bottom line.”

For CN change its ways, he said, “The price of the stock would have to drop.”

According to Holliday, the Teamsters are now in the process of pursuing criminal charges and a civil suit against CN in relation to the accident. He said he hopes the case goes to trial so that the railway’s actions are made public.

The cairn’s unveiling was followed that evening with a reunion of former B.C. Rail employees.

Related information:

- TCRC will carefully study TSB report on Lilooet accident
- CN cost-cutting blamed for deadly derailment
- Rail investigation R06V0136

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