Three share 1971 freight train collision memories

Shock, both in his family and in the community, is what Scott McGregor remembers in the aftermath of a fatal 1971 freight train collision near Great Falls.

His father, Norval McGregor, was one of four men who died in the wreck. The collision ended four lives and changed the course of many more.

"We had just said goodbye to him a few hours before," McGregor said.

He's among the people who reached out to us after a story marked the May 11 anniversary of the collision.

"It hit the town of Great Falls really big. There were hundreds of people at my dad's funeral. There was an outpouring of sorrow, grief. People couldn't believe it happened," he said. "That was a tough thing for everybody."

McGregor, then 13, said he and his siblings were long foggy on many of the details. They'd been shielded as children. Until Clint Kegel, whose father, Charles Kegel, was chief dispatcher on duty that night in Havre, shared his father's step-by-step recollection, he hadn't understood what went wrong that night besides "a problem with the dispatch."

"We all hope through that wreck safety changed, procedures changed," he said.

McGregor remembered his dad as someone who always signed up for extra shifts when they came. A time or two he took his son to Havre with him.

"He just got called out for that train that particular day," he said.

"I'm glad people still do remember it happened, that the people who were involved haven't been forgotten," McGregor said. He lives in Phoenix, Ariz., now.

"My pop was a real great guy. I was blessed to have him as long as I had him," he said.
His dad's identical twin died two years ago. When he'd spend time with his uncle, "it was like having my dad back. I got some of those rites of passage with him."

As they left his uncle's memorial service at the cemetery, a train went by as if on cue.

"Every time my uncle saw a train, he'd say, ‘There's Norval,'" McGregor said.

A double rainbow appeared. The brothers were finally together again.

Philip Lee, a retired railroad worker, shows off a list of conductors he worked with during his time With Great Northern Railway. One of his close friends, Norval McGregor, was killed during the 1971 head-on train collision. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)

Brakeman Thomas Kirby broke every bone in his body in the wreck, and diesel was pumped from his lungs. The man next to him in the table of trains "felt like oatmeal."

Kirby's grandson, Samuel Kirby, who followed him into railroading, remembered gravel was still coming out of his grandpa's head when Samuel was a child.

After the wreck, Thomas Kirby, who started his railroad career in the Army in World War II in England.
"He'd only talk about it in bits and pieces," Samuel Kirby said. "He went into some gruesome details that should probably be left to rest."

Kirby has worked on the railroad with several others whose fathers were killed in or responded to the wreck. As for his grandfather, he did a lot of gardening and watched sports. He was part of Sons of Norway.

"There was no big buyouts for people who were hurt," he said. "I don't think he was bitter about what happened."

As a carman, Kirby fixes trains and responds to derailments.

"We take our safety and inspections of the trains seriously," he said. "We're here to make sure they're safe to begin with."

Philip Lee, 91, knows he could have died that night had he not been on the line to Butte instead of Havre. Someone called his wife with condolences. She didn't even know there'd been a collision.

A conductor, he remembers being so devastated he refused to help untangle the smashed-up train. He knew the men who died too well to bare it.

"Norval and I were more than just partners at the railroad. We hunted and fished together. We knew each others' families," he said. "Norval was very nice, a good brakeman, a good conductor. When you get your work list, he knew it, and he would help you. He was serious about his work."

He still got tears in his eyes thinking about the families the four men who died in the wreck left behind.

"You feel more sorry for the families than the individual in the wreck," he said. "There's nothing you could say."

Lee remembers railroaders losing toes, thumbs and hands. It was common to jump on and off moving trains then. And he remembers a swell of commitment to safety, too. That would become his specialty.

"It could have been me. I gauged my work by that," he said.
Four Die in Freight Train Collision

Two Others Injured Seriously in Crash
Train collision was the stuff of nightmares in 1971 as two Burlington Northern freight trains collided near Great Falls

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The men who lived through the ensuing collision would never forget the grinding pile-up of locomotives and freight cars near Ryan Dam.

Four railroaders died that night on Sheffels farm north of Great Falls. Two were seriously injured.

They were the victims of a series of small mistakes and coincidences that added up to a catastrophe.

Had the trains met somewhere else, perhaps the story would have ended differently. The rough terrain and deep cut hid the oncoming train. It blocked the frantic radio calls.

The northbound train was supposed to stop at Portage, 10 miles to the north, and wait for the southbound train to pass. The southbound train didn't get that message, though.

The train coming from Havre was a 64-car, 250-ton train, and from Great Falls, 100-ton, 20-car northbound train.

A 1971 photo shows the Rainbow Bridge and Dam, with a Burlington Northern Railroad freight train running east and north from Great Falls to Sheffels. (Photo: Chuck Hatler photo)

Charles Kegel was chief dispatcher on duty that night in Havre. His son Clint Kegel said the wreck "bothered him to the day he died."
"He thought that if he had gone into the dispatcher's booth, he might somehow have realized something was amiss," he said. "I don't know that he could have stopped it. I'm not sure the chief ever had time to look over a dispatcher's shoulder, but he always wondered."

Clint Kegel, with memories from his father's account and his own experience in the industry, worked out this account with approximate times...

At the time, the railroad from Minneapolis to Seattle had centralized train control, which divides a track into 2- to 4-mile blocks with signals at each end to tell a train engineer what to do.

The Great Falls area was "dark territory," though. That meant there weren't such signals but instead engineers relied on written orders.

The Budd Car, a small passenger train, made its last run on April 30, 1971, just before the wreck. The car ran on a regular schedule, which everyone knew, but freight trains were "extra trains," which ran when there were enough cars, engines and a crew available. Without the Budd Cars, perhaps people weren't paying as much attention.

Oddly, trains were only labeled as going east and west, even going north and south between Great Falls and Havre.

On May 11, a dispatcher came into work in Havre at 8 a.m. and learned there would be a train heading for Great Falls at 9 a.m. He called Great Falls and folks there didn't have a Havre-bound train scheduled for the afternoon or evening. He wrote up orders to send the train to Great Falls at 9.

But then the Havre yardmaster called. Engine 2501 was out of commission. Its run would be delayed pending repairs.

Right then the dispatcher should have called to get the orders ripped up. Maybe he forgot. Maybe he thought repairs wouldn't take that long.

In the afternoon, the Havre train order operator went off duty. He should have looked through the train clearances and noticed a six-hours-old clearance hadn't been picked up.
He could have called the dispatcher to find out why. He didn't though. The next guy who came on for his shift didn't notice either.

Frank Freeburg, surviving conductor on the larger southbound freight train, searches through the wreckage that was once a diesel engine units for a suitcase belonging to the train's engineer, Don R. Schrammeck, who requested that the luggage be recovered while he was en route to a hospital in serious condition. (Photo: TRIBUNE ARCHIVE)

A new dispatcher came on, too. He had a train order book to consult and a verbal transfer. The first dispatcher didn't mention he'd cleared a train to run to Great Falls.

The new dispatcher didn't notice there were "live orders" for a train that hadn't left Havre.

Shortly after, the yardmaster called the dispatcher to say the train was ready to leave at 5 p.m. He called Great Falls. The people there had a train leaving at 8 p.m. He did some figuring (the story problems of math class are real!).

The orders were written. The trains would meet at a siding in Portage and neither would go beyond until the other had arrived.

People missed that there were now two sets of orders, one from 9 a.m. and one from the afternoon.

The train crew grabbed the wrong ones.
Clint Kegel imagines a busy relay office. A train crewman reaching over the desk, grabbing orders and waving the bundle to the train order clerk, who probably acknowledged it with a wave.

The engineer and conductor didn't notice their clearance had been issued at 9 a.m. They left for Great Falls.

Later, the northbound train left Great Falls. Its orders were to stop in Portage.

At about 10 p.m., the dispatcher was getting things ready for the next dispatcher, who takes over at midnight. Suddenly he realized there were two running orders active for train Extra 2501 West to Great Falls.

He jumped up and ran to the relay office. He asked the train order operation which set of orders the crew had. They found the 4 p.m. orders but not the 9 a.m. orders.

The dispatcher “turned white as a ghost.” He ran back to his office. He tried to reach the Extra 2501. He tried the Extra 2502. Neither train responded. He knew they'd gone too far and were in the area of ravines south of Carter.
"Today radios have improved to the point that both trains would hear the dispatcher calling them," Clint Kegel said. "But at this time the radio system was spotty, and there were no radio signals in those cuts."

CRASH CENTER: One Burlington Northern diesel unit was turned completely around and other was ripped completely from its frame and running gear by the impact of a collision of two freight trains on a curve in a deep cut about 10 miles east of Great Falls. (Photo: TRIBUNE ARCHIVE)

The dispatcher told his boss, Charles Kegel, what he feared was happening. Both called the Great Falls yard and asked them to try to reach the trains with their radios.

"They started calling anyone who might be in the area in a highway vehicle on the odd chance they might be in a place where they could reach the trains. But there was no one out there," Clint Kegel said.

They called the sheriff's office to see if they had anyone who could flag down a train.

But then came the report of an "unidentified thunderous sound in the Sheffels area."

The worst had happened.

Clint Kegel said he figures both trains were going the maximum track speed, 50 mph. With the terrain and curve in the track, they probably were half a mile apart before they saw the headlights of the oncoming train.

"I'm sure each engineer dynamited his brakes (meaning they applied full brakes) but it takes a long distance to stop a train, and they were both probably still going 35 or 40 mph when they hit," he said.

When they hit head-on one Burlington Northern diesel engine was completely turned around and another was ripped off its frame and running gear.
The southbound train's conductor Frank Freeburg told the Tribune he had no idea another train was on the line.

"We had clearance at Havre to come straight through except for a stop at Chappell, a railroad siding near Loma, to pick up two cars of wheat. We did that and pulled out again," he said.

SURVIVORS: Among the survivors of the tragic Burlington Northern freight collision north of Great Falls were these two "knights of the open road." The pair said they caught a wrong train out of Havre but were planning to go to Spokane. Both said they were awakened by the impact, which slid them across the floor of the boxcar into the wall. Elton Haughey, left, said it was lucky he learned many years ago to sleep with his feet toward the front of the car, otherwise he might not have lived to tell the story. His companion, a Montana native, declined to give his name. (Photo: TRIBUNE ARCHIVE)

If only someone had figured out the mistake sooner, he lamented. Someone could have stopped the train in Big Sandy, Fort Benton or Carter "and headed us off," or told the Great Falls yardmaster to stop the northbound train from leaving.

When he radioed in the collision, he couldn't understand in the garbled static what dispatch said. He reached the other conductor though. They were making plans to set out flares when the deputies and troopers began arriving with ambulances.

James Vernon Jr., Paul Hartman, Norval McGregor and Gene Torchia of Great Falls died in the wreckage. Two others faced serious injuries.

The damage, in 1971 dollars, was $722,000.

Laura Kirby-Wilson's grandfather, Thomas Kirby, broke every bone in his body in the wreck, she said. It ended his career with the railroad, but not his love of trains. He was proud when his grandson, Samuel Kirby, became a BNSF carman.

Thomas Kirby told her the man next to him "felt like oatmeal" after the impact.
One survivor, whom the Tribune called a "knight of the open road," hopped on the train in Havre, not the train he meant to board, on his way to Spokane.

Elton Haughey told a reporter he and another drifter woke with the impact, which slid them across the boxcar and slammed them into the boxcar wall. Haughey attributed his survival to sleeping with his feet toward the front of the car, a strategy he'd learned.

Copper tubing coils spread for a quarter of a mile alongside the tracks. Railroad cranes had to sort out the wreckage.

After the railroad and federal investigations finished, the afternoon dispatcher was fired, though six people could have prevented the wreck if they'd noticed the catastrophe in the making. Cascade County Attorney J. Fred Bourdeau found no evidence of criminal negligence.

Twenty-five years earlier within a mile of the wreck, a Great Northern passenger train derailed, killing an engineer and fireman from Great Falls. A Sheffels ranch employee was
pulling a steel drag, which stuck in the tracks. He wasn't able to signal the train to stop before it collided with the drag.

In the collision, a steam line on the locomotive broke and poured steam into the train, burning to death the two men. In was 1945, and the train was loaded with servicemen and members of the American League All-Star baseball team. One sailor braved the steam trying to rescue the men but was unsuccessful.

Clint Kegel became a train dispatcher, too. He'll never forget the words of one instructor: "Every single rule we're going to talk about was written with someone's blood."

He carried his father's stories of the 1971 collision, which made him more careful.

"I tripled-checked, quadruple-checked," he said. "I knew men's lives were at stake"