



Great Northern Railway Disaster 1909

BC LABOUR
HERITAGE
CENTRE

Banouchouga

The 1909 GNR Railway Disaster

by Eric Damer

At 6:00 a.m. on the morning of November 28, 1909 a work crew for the Great Northern Railway sat huddled on seats in an unheated boxcar as it rattled eastward along the northern shore of Burnaby Lake. Some were asleep. The rain was falling in torrents, worse than usual for the west coast; it had been pouring all night. The crew—most of whom did not want to be there—was heading out for weekly track maintenance in the Fraser Valley south of New Westminster.

A few minutes after passing the sawmills at Lozells, one of Burnaby's newest neighbourhoods, the small work train slowed to about 30 kilometres an hour to negotiate a curve before heading into New Westminster. It then crossed over Kilby Creek¹, a small rivulet that usually flowed gently through a culvert below the rail bed and some six metres of sandy infill.



The scene of the accident at Lost Creek, November 28 or 29, 1909. Photo by George Alfred Barrowclough | New Westminster Museum and Archives, IHP 1695

Suddenly, just after the locomotive and tender passed over the creek, the ground beneath completely washed away, plunging the boxcar and its forty-three passengers into the ravine. The flat car immediately following sliced through the boxcar and its occupants as the engine lumbered backwards onto the wreckage. Twenty-two men were killed, some instantly, and another fifteen injured badly. The rain continued to fall as the creek pooled around the carnage, hampering attempts to rescue survivors over the next few hours.

Newspapers in New Westminster, Vancouver, and Victoria reported the disaster the following day, often in lurid detail. The papers described how the work crew had suffered all the casualties, and how the engineer and caboose crews had jumped to safety upon feeling the crash. No one in the boxcar had been able to escape the calamity. Sensational headlines made the front pages of newspapers across Canada and the United States, catching readers' attention with news of the tragedy and the fact that the work crew was Japanese, many with wives and children.

British Columbia in 1909 was not a friendly place for workers from Japan. Although their numbers were smaller than those from China, the Japanese were adapting well to their new home and proving themselves to be very capable workers, competing with Europeans in the fishing and other industries. Quite a few were married with families, suggesting that they intended to stay.

The growing military power of Japan added to the tensions, leading some European-Canadians to believe that spies lived in the province. Many BC residents were unhappy that Canada's immigration laws still permitted Asians into the country, despite a tax on incoming Chinese, transportation restrictions for incoming South Asians, and a recent diplomatic agreement between Canada and Japan to limit the number of Japanese entering the country.

To discourage Asian immigration, the provincial government placed prohibitive clauses in railway construction contracts. Railways were booming industries in the province, and several were denied permission to hire Asian labourers. However, two older railways had avoided these contractual limits and quietly employed poorly-paid Asian labour.

As historian Patricia Roy notes, the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Great Northern Railway, an American company operating in British Columbia, hid their Asian work crews on quiet stretches of railroad. Only in the case of new construction, strike breaking, or major accidents, like the one in Burnaby on that tragic rainy night, did the public notice these gangs.²

In fact, as reported in the Japanese-language newspaper *The Continental News*, the Katsuda work gang that met its fate in

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Kilby Creek had quietly entered Canada from the United States, as arranged by a Seattle-based trading company.³ Workers from Japan certainly did not enjoy the small protective gains earned by railroad activists in the early 1900s, and remained a “marginal nationality” in the railway workforce.⁴

In their reporting of the railway disaster, English-language newspapers reflected the prejudices and animosity that still lingered two years after Vancouver’s anti-Asian riots.

Many Japanese workers were killed or seriously injured, the reporters noted using racial slurs, but one white passenger had hurt his foot. At least the work train had discovered the washed-out culvert mere hours before the Owl passenger train from Seattle was due to pass by. Had the Owl train not waited in New

At least some of the local newspapers reported the names of the men and expressed empathy for their families, and praised the survivors for not complaining and bearing their fate calmly and stoically.

Thirteen of the workmen killed in the accident were married; nine of the injured were as well. The survivors visited the funeral homes and cut hair from each of the deceased, sending it home to

HEAVY TOLL TAKEN BY STORM

DREADFUL DISASTER

Twenty-three dead, fourteen injured. That is the total casualty list morning of the wreck on the Colorado Northern at Sapperton yesterday before daybreak, when a work train rushing at full speed through the forest, crashed down through a wheat field and piled up, a medley of splintered cars, engine and human bodies.

The spot where the accident occurred, about a mile from the Bonanza farm on the road to the lake. Here the acres a long curve and had the

Frightful Result of Smash on Great Northern Near New Westminster Yesterday Morning.

He Was George W. Kemp, Commercial Traveller,
Who Was Riding on Engine—
Not Cleared Away.

Another freight railway tragedy occurred on Friday morning in the Ibaraki district. A Great Kōryū express train, on which were 10 Japanese workmen, was struck by a freight train, including a tank car, west through a wash-out at 10:30 a.m. Two of the Japanese laborers aboard the train were either killed outright or died within a few minutes. The white tank car had suddenly burst open, and the driver, George W. McLaughlin, of Chicago, whose right foot was so badly crushed that it was amputated by

RAINSTORM WORST IN YEARS



Sensational headlines and images made the front pages of newspapers across Canada and the United States.

family according to Japanese custom. It would have reached Japan around the time of Japanese New Year, adding a very sad note to what should be a joyous celebration.

The deceased were buried in South Vancouver, most with Buddhist rites but a few with Christian.⁶ Members of the local Japanese community took donations to help widows and children, but few whites seemed concerned.

The *Continental News* further explained that some of the workmen had earlier heard that the track was dangerous and unstable, and great care should be taken to watch for problems. Even a few whites agreed that the railway company owed the workers that consideration.

Another Japanese work crew was sent to Kilby Creek later that day to clean up the wreckage. Conditions were so difficult and gruesome that the crew was paid twice their usual rate. A few days later, the remaining members of the Katsuda gang were asked to get back to work. Not surprisingly, no one was motivated to do so. However, the *Continental News* did not comment on the great insensitivity of the request. In fact, the reporting in the newspaper was surprisingly calm and non-judgmental, expressing only appreciation for what little assistance was provided.

During the inquest held in New Westminster the following week, railway officials admitted that the boxcar was not designed for safety. They also admitted that visibility in the dark and rain was almost zero, particularly since the engine's headlight was not operating properly. However, the track had been inspected a week earlier, and a train had passed by the day before without incident.

Engineers attested that the sand and gravel filling the gulley above Kilby Creek and the culvert through the bottom were built to commonly accepted standards, although the fill was not

intended to withstand a torrential downpour as had fallen the week before.

Yet a former crew foreman testified otherwise. He and mill owner C.T.W. Piper and his son, who lived near the accident site, argued that the culvert was much too small for the amount of water that could be expected down the creek in a storm; other creeks had washed out culverts before. Besides, the wooden culvert had been reinforced with cross-bars that potentially caught debris, restricting drainage.

It was also noted during the inquest that the soils in the area were soft, and several sections of track had earlier been reinforced with gravel. The increased logging activity in the area may also have contributed to heavy run-off, although this was not noted at the time. Lawyers for the railway cross-examined Piper fiercely, prompting jurors to ask for a stop to the bullying.

After several days of witness testimony, the jury concluded that no blame could be attached to any person. The disaster was an accident largely caused by the severe rain storm. The jury recommended that a night track walker be employed in the future should such a storm again pummel the region. Members of the jury and the witnesses, who had expressed their impatience with the process, hastened off to conduct their usual business. The small number of spectators also departed, and the even smaller number of Japanese in the audience quietly returned to their lives.

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The railways returned to their earlier practices, and Burnaby council sent the Great Northern Railway a bill for expenses

incurred by the municipality.⁷ Over four decades would pass before working people in British Columbia earned basic workplace protections that applied to men and women of Japanese heritage.

NOTES

¹Kilby Creek was later renamed Lost Creek.

²Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1989), 256.

³*The Continental News*, 29 November 1909, p. 1 and 30 November 1909, p. 1. I am indebted to Christopher Domitter for a translation.

⁴Fred Cotrell, as cited in Allen Seager, "'A new labour era? Canadian National Railways and the Railway Worker, 1919–1929,'" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3, no. 1 (1992): 183.

⁵Friends of Minidoka, "History of Japanese American Immigration to the Northwest," <http://www.minidoka.org/hist-immigration>

⁶"Will Inter Bodies with Buddhist Rites," *The Daily News*, 3 December 1909, p. 1.

⁷Burnaby Council Minutes, 8 January 1910.

OTHER REFERENCES CONSULTED

1. Hugh A. Haliday. *Wreck: Canada's Worst Railway Accidents*. Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1997.

2. "Twenty-Five Meet Death When Culvert Breaks Beneath Train." *The Daily News*, 29 November 1909, p. 1.

Project Contributors:

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"Working People Built BC"

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