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Tragedy in Ignacio Marin's Deadliest Train Wreck

100 Years Ago—August 8, 1910

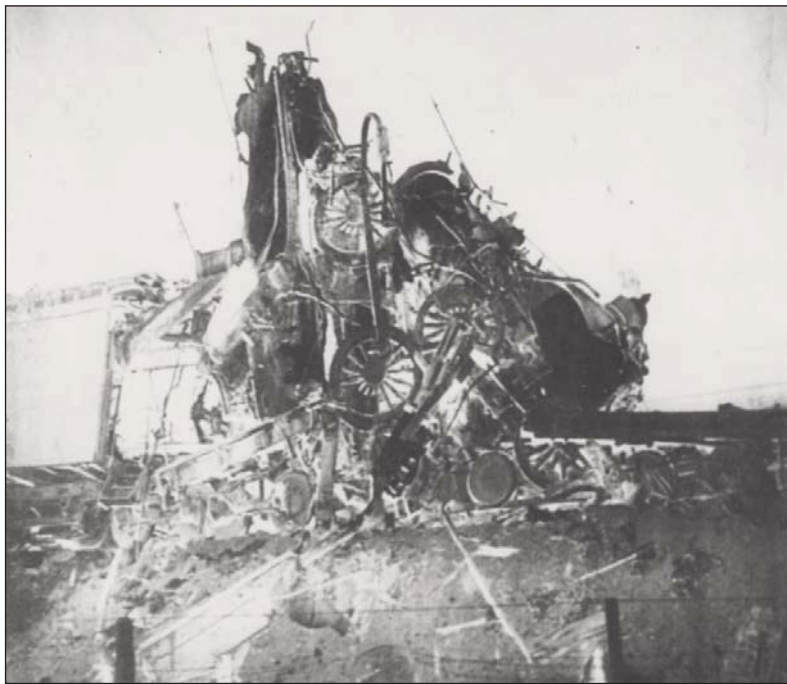
By Mike Read and Diane Campbell

The northbound passenger train No. 6, originating in San Francisco and bound for Santa Rosa, consisted of a baggage car and five coaches, including a crowded smoker car. It had just left the San Rafael station at 6:20 p.m.

Novato resident on board the No. 6 was James William "Will" Cain, who had just received the telephone franchise for Novato in 1908. Also on board were Antonio V. DeBorba who had just opened DeBorba's Saloon on Grant Avenue in 1909, James Garforth, an employee of the Novato Land Company, and Neils Nielson, a landscape gardener in San Rafael, who lived on a little farm in Novato with his wife and son.

On this same day in 1910, a work train, the southbound No. 18 "Vichy" built in 1889, consisting of a caboose and two flat cars with a steam roller on one of the flat cars, had come down from

Santa Rosa valley and had stopped at the Ignacio station waiting for the northbound trains to pass. On board the Vichy was the conductor George Flaherty, engineer William Lyttaker and fireman William "Bert" Speaker.



The collision was so forceful that the noses of both engines pointed upward, and the noise was heard in Novato.

The northbound No. 6 train was due in at Ignacio, eight miles north of San Rafael, at 6:40 p.m. Daylight savings time had not yet been adopted in the U.S. so there was approximately 60 minutes of daylight remaining in the day. The southbound Vichy work train reached Ignacio at 6:32 p.m., eight minutes ahead of the scheduled arrival of the passenger train. For reasons unknown, instead of waiting, the Vichy starts its way down the single track towards San Rafael.

In the meantime Will Cain, who is sitting in the front of the northbound No. 6 train smoker car, sees Mr. DeBorba seated in the rear of the smoker car

and decides to join him. As Will is sitting down, the No. 6 train is just one and one half miles away from the Ignacio station (present day location is just south of the Main Gate Road bridge that spans the train tracks) and coming around a reverse curve. By then

speed of 40 miles an hour. To their horror, the crew of the No. 6 train, engineer Robert Reynolds, fireman C. E. Hyatt and conductor Alex E. Sherer, all see the collision coming. They quickly put the northbound train into reverse and jump from the train. In the Vichy, only conductor Flaherty saw the oncoming disaster and was able to escape from the train before impact.

The tremendous force of the impact caused the two engines to “plunge into each other’s throats and crushed the baggage car and the smoker car together so that two-thirds of the smoker was telescoped.” The other cars on the passenger train were undamaged. The collision was so forceful that it has been said that the noise was heard in Novato.

The telegraph machine in the Tiburon station (and presumably in all other stations along the line) frantically clicked the ominous message “WK-WK-WK”, meaning, “WRECK-WRECK-WRECK.” The frantic call was received by second trick (shift) operator William Cole, on duty from 4 p.m. to midnight at the Tiburon station. (Cole would later become the



Flashlight photograph of the wreck taken the night of the wreck.

the southbound Vichy train was running at a fair rate of speed. The northbound No. 6 was traveling at a



Two wrecking crews worked with block and tackle and ax and crowbar clearing away the tangled mass of iron and broken wood until sunrise.

station agent in Novato after being hired by Henry Pini in 1918 as the manager of H. Pini & Co.) All telegraph operators along the line received the same message and stopped and immediately cleared the wires.

County physician Dr. John Henry Kuser (who would be made Division Surgeon for the



The heap of wreckage was piled high along the sides of the track, and the torn, sprung tracks were straightened and made firm for resumption of traffic by the morning.

Northwestern Pacific Railroad on this very day) was at the Novato train station when the news of the disaster arrived. Pressing into service the handcar belonging to the section gang, they made the run down the tracks to the scene of the wreck in 12 minutes. Dr. Kuser was the first physician on the ground, and immediately set to the heroic work of administering to the seriously wounded.

A quick examination of the No. 6 revealed (incorrectly) that the engineer and the fireman were dead. Later on it was determined that they were still alive and they were taken to the Northwestern hospital. E. L. Lyttaker,

the engineer of the No. 6, suffered from injuries to the head and a broken left leg and would recover from these injuries. Fireman William (Bert) Speaker had injuries to his head and his right arm was fractured.

Dr. Manie, a medical student who was spending his vacation with his folks in Novato, rushed down to the scene of the crash in his auto accompanied by his brother Victor. They rendered whatever assistance possible to the victims of the wreck. Soon other doctors, nurses, and officials arrived, among them general manager W. S. Palmer, who directed speedy transport of the injured by ferry steamer out of Sausalito to the Southern Pacific Hospital in San Francisco, where they were treated.

Will Cain, who had just sat down next to Mr. DeBorba when the trains collided, suffered a fractured thigh bone and injuries to his face and head. He would be confined to his bed for months. But in all the confusion, the newspaper, *The Petaluma Argus*, dated August 9, reported that Will had been killed in the accident. A.V. DeBorba was thrown out of his seat to the floor and he missed being crushed by the telescoping smoker car by about six inches. He would escape with severe shock and a contused shoulder. Unfortunately, everyone sitting forward of Will Cain and Mr. DeBorba lost their lives.



This is a photograph of the smoking car of the passenger train that was telescoped by the baggage car. All eleven people killed were in the smoking car.

Niels Nielson of Black Point was instantly killed. One of the most dramatic and heart rendering incidents of the disaster was Mrs. Neilson, who drove the four miles in horse and buggy to the wreck and noticing Dr. Kuser, grabbed his arm and implored him to find her husband. It happened that Dr. Kuser was endeavoring to extricate the lifeless body of her husband at that very moment, but fortunately amid the darkness and broken timbers she did not recognize him.

The carnage that followed the collision was frightful. Of the many killed, most of them were cut in two, while one body was severed three times. Limbs were torn from trunks and one body in the smoker was found upright in a seat, the upper part of the torso leaning out of the window, and the head gone. Although several persons were seriously injured in the first coach behind the smoker, there were no fatalities and no women were injured. All in all a total of 11 men lost their lives that evening and up to 30 were injured.

It was reported that at least 50 automobiles visited the scene of the wreck that night, their owners assist-



Picture shows Will Cain with crutch, his left leg would end up two inches shorter after the train wreck.

ed in carrying the injured away and provided aid to the rescuers as they could. A huge bonfire was lit to provide light to aid in the rescue operation.

Flaherty, the conductor of the Vichy, was reported to be hysterical and was unable to explain how his train happened to be on the tracks at the same time as the passenger train. According to officials and passengers, the cause of the wreck was the disobedience of orders by conductor George Flaherty. Despite telegraphic dispatch instructing him to

remain at Ignacio until the passenger train had gone by, he deliberately sent his train southward towards death and destruction. Flaherty claimed to have given the order to wait at the station for the arrival of the passenger train, not the order to proceed. On August 25, 1910, a jury declared Northwestern Pacific liable of "negligence ... through its employees, the crew of the Vichy" after deliberating twenty-five minutes on the evidence placed before them. Conductor Flaherty was the main witness.

The following are excerpts of local newspapers reporting on the deadly crash in the days after. Because of the time of day and confusion at the scene, there were many conflicting and inaccurate accounts reported.

Wreckage Cleared Off Tracks By Two Crews With Tackle [Special Dispatch to The Call]

SAN RAFAEL, Aug. 9. — Two wrecking crews carried to the scene of the Ignacio collision late Monday night and early yesterday morning worked with block and tackle and ax and crowbar clearing away the tangled mass of iron and broken wood until sunrise. The heap of wreckage was piled high along the sides of the track, and the torn, sprung tracks were straightened and made firm for the resumption of traffic.

So quickly was the work performed that the regular schedule was maintained yesterday morning. Passengers passing along the route yesterday saw engines, battered and twisted, on either side of the line. Remnants of the splintered baggage car and flat work cars of the freight were dumped to the side also, but the damaged coaches and the smoker of the passenger were towed a mile away from the scene.

The smoker still has a section of the baggage car driven into its fore end. This was the attraction of crowds of persons from the nearby towns who journeyed to view the car of death. The shattered sides and the broken woodwork are red with the stain of blood. The marks of the axes and bars with which the rescuers worked frantically to free the imprisoned victims were examined by the curious.

At the scene of the collision the greatest difficulty that confronted the wreckers was to move the engines that — driven into each other at awful speed — were wedged tightly together. This was done with block and tackle. Strong posts were driven into the sides of hills and ropes attached to the engine. One was drawn to either side and the taut ropes wrenched

them apart at the same time, the engines falling with a heavy crash on the side of the track.

Both engines were smashed and broken beyond the hope of repair. The trucks were wrenched from one, while wheels and axles were twisted and chipped. The tender of the passenger engine parted from the cab and forward section and was driven back into the forward section of the baggage car. Had not the engine crews jumped from the flying locomotives they would have been killed.



This is the location of the train wreck now. Hamilton water tower can be seen in the background.

Death Claims Thirteen Victims of Ignacio Wreck

Petaluma Argus – Aug. 9, 1910

George Riley, Will Pochlmann, P. W. Richardson and H. W. Emerson of this city lose their lives. W. F. Bachelor and Jack Brooks seriously injured but both will recover – Blame for the accident placed on the crew of the freight train – Two Santa Rosa men killed. At 4 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon Coroner Sawyer of Marin county gave the Argus the first official and absolutely correct list of the dead. There are 13 including W. D. Burton of Berkeley who died in San Francisco on Tuesday afternoon. The official list is as follows up to 4 p.m.

THE DEAD: George Riley, Petaluma, H. W. Emerson, Petaluma, Will Pochlmann, Petaluma, P. W. Richardson, Petaluma, Herman Beyer, Santa Rosa, Pincus Levin, Santa Rosa, John Wilkinson, a San Quentin Guard, W. Neilson, San Rafael, J. W. Kane (Cain) Novato, G. Crivellone, San Francisco, W. D. Burton, Berkeley, M. A. Banks and A. W. Banks Rockford Ill. Of these Mr. Richardson died as he was being taken on board the ferry steamer at Sausalito. Mr. Kane (Cain) died while the boat was crossing the bay and Mr. Burton died on Tuesday at San Francisco.

Flaherty Arrested

Petaluma Argus – Aug. 10, 1910

George Flaherty the conductor of the westbound extra No.18 freight of NWP line, which collided with No. 6 regular passenger northbound on Monday evening at Ignacio, was arrested by Chief Detective I. E. Powers yesterday in San Rafael and taken to Sausalito for an investigation, at which General Manager W. S. Palmer and Supt. W. J. Hunter were present.



George Flaherty, Conductor

The result of the investigation was that the blame for the terrible accident was laid on Flaherty's shoulders. In telling of the conclusions arrived at by

himself and his colleagues, Manager Palmer said:

“The moral lesson brought out by this investigation is the fallibility of the human race. Here is one deplorable instance where fallibility should not have been in evidence. It was the tendency to become too cock sure through usage, that caused Flaherty to signal his train to proceed when No. 6 had not passed the Ignacio station. In omitting attention to a small detail which comes under the heading of ‘routine,’ Flaherty was the cause of many deaths. When such carelessness results in tragedy I believe that an exemplary punishment should be muted out.”

Flaherty had recovered his balance to a great extent Tuesday and he bore himself manfully at the investigation and made no pretense at excusing himself. After the ordeal before his employers he said:

“I cannot tell how I came to jump at the conclusion that No. 6 had passed Ignacio. Every train that passes through (is entered into the) registers. It was my duty to inspect the train register check before ordering the train to proceed. It was also the engineer's duty to inspect the register for the No 144. The Sonoma Valley train passed, I thought it was No. 6 without a glance at the register I hailed Lyttaken and gave him the O.K. sign. It was carelessness and I have no excuse to make.

No official action, save that of suspending Flaherty, will be taken until Lyttaken is well enough to appear before a board of inquiry

Flaherty's Blunder! Conductor Takes All Blame For Ignacio Wreck

Marin County Banner (Novato paper at the time) August 13, 1910

The terrible wreck on the Northwestern Pacific railroad Monday evening last below Ignacio, was the worst in the history of the road.

The gruesome details of the accident have already been told and published in the daily press and the early weekly newspapers, and by this time our readers are familiar with the result of the criminal negligence of conductor Flaherty, who disobeyed orders and sent his work-train crashing into the Santa Rosa passenger, due here at 6:47.

A number of Novato residents were on board, four of whom were made victims in the ill-fated smoking car.

Niels Nielson of Black Point was instantly killed.

Will Cain's left leg was fractured at the thigh and was otherwise injured about the face and head. James Garforth, an employee of the Novato land Company, was somewhat injured; and A.V. DeBorba escaped with a severe shock and a contused shoulder while those sitting directly in front of him were crushed together.

Petaluma mourns the loss of four killed and several injured in the collision. Killed: George Riley capitalist; Will Poehlman and W. H. Emerson messengers; and P. W. Richardson, clerk at Hazlitt's store.

W. S. Bachelor, chief accountant of the Golden Eagle Milling Co., had an arm broken and otherwise bruised.



At least fifty automobiles visited the scene of the wreck during that evening. Over the next few days, some 500 cars and horse and buggies would visit the train-wreck site, most of them taking some of the train wreckage home with them as a souvenir.