

Duane Williams

LHS 1949

Lake Zurich, Illinois

All of the recollections published in the Lakota American regarding the Empire Builder wreck have been interesting; however, I believe the best one to be from Myrna (Geritz) Baumann. She verifies my memory of the correct time as shortly after 6pm although the Grand Forks Herald and other writers stated 7:30pm. My mother saved the original Heralds and I gave them to Terry Devine in June 2002 for the Nelson County Historical Society at Stump Lake. The Herald records were destroyed in the Grand Forks flood of 1997. I remember that we were at the supper table when B.F. Stevens, school supt., and chairman of the Nelson County Red Cross called my Dad, Frank Williams, who was County Disaster Chairman with the news of the accident. He picked up my dad and left for Michigan. Einar Johnson, State's Attorney also was first on the scene. The Grand Forks Herald stated that the three of them served lunch to the first work crew. Several women from Michigan helped them serve sandwiches, coffee, etc. all night.

I was 14 years old, but had a driver's permit and as we listened to the radio about the horrible accident, my mother was very anxious to visit the scene so I had to promise not to drive over 35 miles per hour. That was the speed limit in WWII. We picked up Ann Hatula and her daughter, Charlene, (age 8) and my brother, Larry (age 9), and we were on our 12 mile trip. There were many milling about and I believe the Lakota section gang was helping control the crowd as it was a horrendous scene, however, everyone was amazingly quiet.

I started working for Mr. & Mrs. Graham in the fall of 1947 when I was a Junior in High School. I worked summers through high school and college including the summer of 1953 until October when I entered the USAF for two years serving as a supply officer in Korea & Japan. I

also worked in the summer of 1956 before taking a management training job with NY Life in Minneapolis. H. Chas Graham was the County Coroner for many years. He started in Lakota in 1928 & sold the mortuary business to Dan Aaker in 1959. After he died in 1979 I had all of his funeral records which I later gave to Jim Aaker. I had all of the Coroner's Reports which I gave to Terry Devine as I thought they should be in the Courthouse. Dan Aaker brought the Wehe house then owned by Frank Seebart one block west of Main Street. He added a beautiful chapel. His son Jim, joined the business after graduating from the San Francisco College of Embalming. Someone said the bodies were taken to Devils Lake. Mr. Graham set up a morgue in his large 3 stall garage. He had the remains of 12 military & 7 civilians. He had a 1938 La Salle combination hearse and ambulance and a 1931 Studebaker hearse (both black) and his personal car which he left outside. He didn't want the bodies on the cement floor so he borrowed grain doors from Bill Zimmer, mgr. of the Peavey elevator and O.J. Sundeen owner of his elevator. Train engines at that time were coal powered steam so those not killed on impact were scalded to death. It was necessary to ship the remains in sealed caskets. There were 34 fatalities which included 20 military and 14 civilians. The others were handled by two Devils Lake Mortuaries, Toomey and Gilbertson. Bodies and train seats were compacted into 12 feet of the observation car not half as someone else stated. The US Government paid for the military caskets.

An additional fact is there was no vault in the Lakota cemetery at the time. The ground in ND was frozen six feet deep. One winter we held 26 caskets in rough boxes in the garage. Some were buried in Wilbert Vaults in the spring. We had funerals in many country churches. Many people wanted to storage in our garage so farmer friends would build a fire to melt the ground while digging the grave. On many occasions they were having a few Beers or stronger & we always brought the lowering machine the day before when they were only four feet deep, so

we never waited for them to dig the required six feet. Mr. Graham was very irritated when he found them half drunk.

The Coroner's jury found three trainmen guilty of negligence for not setting out flares at Niagara and Petersburg as there were no block signals at the time. The first Pullman section had "hot box" trouble (overheated bearings). Einar Johnson was attorney for the Great Northern (later Burlington Northern) for several states. As far as I know there were no lawsuits as Einar settled it all. His son, Loren, later joined his father & was also G.N. Attorney I believe. He lives in Arizona and would have more info. Terry Devine later bought the practice, however he passed away in 2005.

I always thought as many others also, how ridiculous it was to run two fast trains only 25 minutes apart. It should have been at least an hour. The accident could easily have been avoided.

I almost forgot about Mrs. Brannan from Clifton, NJ whose upper body hung out of the window for seven hours. She was conscious most of the time and died as she was put into the ambulance. I believe she and her husband were chiropractors in NJ. She was on her way to her father's funeral in Velva, ND. Her brother Dr. Muus was the medical doctor in McVille in the '40's & '50's. Military medics crawled on top of the observation car & held her upper body with sheets. I'll never forget that scene.

I want to complement Maria Vasichek and all of the Michigan volunteers working on the Memorial for the tragic accident. I hope Burlington Northern also contributed to the cost of the memorial.