This Date in Safety History: June 29, 1864 – The Mont St. Hilaire Railway Disaster



Like their neighbours to the south, 19th century Canadians had grand ambitions to build a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Construction of the transcontinental railroad, the Grand Trunk Railway, started in 1853. It began operations between Ontario and Québec 6 years later. But, alas, the Grand Trunk got derailed on its journey to greatness. One of the reasons for that is the disaster that happened on June 29, 1864.

The Deadliest Train Crash in Canadian History

It happened at 1:20 A.M. A passenger train carrying 350 passengers operating between Levis and Montréal approached a drawbridge on the Richelieu River near the town currently known as Mont. St. Hilaire. A red light a mile ahead signaled that the bridge had been raised to allow some barges to pass. But the conductor didn't acknowledge the signal and proceeded toward the bridge.

When the train came onto the upraised bridge, the engine fell into the opening and plunged into the barge passing below. Eleven coaches followed, each crashing on top of the other. What was left of the train sank 10 feet into the river.

The inquiry blamed the disaster on the conductor's failure to heed the red-light signal. The engineer, who survived the accident, was a recent hire. He said that he never saw the red light and that he was unfamiliar with the route.

The Mont St. Hilaire disaster claimed 99 lives, including the conductor and scores of German and Polish passengers aboard. One hundred more people sustained serious injury. In terms of lives lost, it remains Canada's greatest train disaster.

The 10 Deadliest Train Accidents in Canadian History

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Rank	Disaster	Date	What Happened
1	Mont St. Hilaire train disaster	June 29, 1864	Conductor misses red-light signal while approaching a raised bridge causing train to plunge into Richelieu River; 99 killed, over 100 injured.

Rank	Disaster	Date	What Happened
2	Mississauga train derailment	Nov. 10, 1979	Freight train carrying caustic, explosive, and poisonous chemicals derails resulting in the evacuation of 250,000 suburban Toronto residents but, amazingly, no injuries.
3	Hinton train collision	Feb. 8, 1986	Two trains traveling at 96 km/h in Yellowhead County, Alberta, collide head-on; 23 killed, 95 injured.
4	Baptiste Creek train collision	Oct. 27, 1854	Passenger train running 5-hours late collides with gravel train repairing the track in Ontario because the night watchman at the nearby station falsely told the engineer that the gravel train had left; 52 killed, 48 injured.
5	Dugald train crash	Sept. 1, 1947	Westbound passenger train crashes into eastbound train at Ontario station because crew didn’t turn onto a siding as required by railway procedure; 31 killed.
6	Spanish River derailment	Jan. 21, 1910	Passenger train travelling too fast jumps the track after going over a defective rail while approaching a railway crossing causing first-class coach and dining car to plunge into river west of Sudbury, ON; 43 killed.

Rank	Disaster	Date	What Happened
7	Canoe River train collision	Nov. 21, 1950	Westbound train carrying troops during Korean War collides with eastbound train in BC resulting in at least 21 deaths and manslaughter charges against the railway telegraph operators for sending the troop train incomplete information about the other train’s location.
8	Desjardins Canal derailment	March 12, 1857	Broken axle on the engine causes passenger train to jump the tracks, crash through a suspension bridge, and plunge into a canal outside Hamilton; 59 killed, 18 injured.
9	Almonte train collision	Dec. 27, 1942	Troop train crashes into the rear cars of a passenger train while it was sitting at an Ontario station; 39 killed, over 200 injured.
10	Wanstead train collision	Dec. 27, 1902	Passenger train smashes head-on into a freight train while approaching a station in Ontario during a blizzard making it impossible for either train to see the other until the last moment; 31 killed.