May 9, 2014

The Legend of the Lost Train in Devils Lake

· Full text

by Ron T. Keagle

I suspect that most residents of the Pine City area have heard this old legend and probably do not know what to make of it. Maybe you think it sounds farfetched and dismiss it as a made up story. After all, if it were true, wouldn't everybody in the area know about the details? How can a train get lost? Why would a railroad company leave their train in the lake? In the context of the present day era, these questions are reasonable, and their implied answers seem to cast doubt on the veracity of the legend. But the origin of this lost train legend dates from about 120-144 years ago, and in that long ago context, the questions have answers that easily fit the legend.

Today's track through Pine City lies there just as it has for over a century. Railroaders have been running trains on it ever since it was built, but none of the railroaders running the trains today have any connection to the earliest times through word of mouth communications passed down through history. The day to day details of that early era are simply lost history, and nearly impossible to relate to from this present era.

In the rough and wild times of the pioneering era, railroad companies sent their primitive trains into the wilderness to confront hills, curves, rivers, streams, bogs, lakes, canyons, and all manner of natural adversities. Train derailments and pile-ups happened all the time. They were much more common in the late 1800s than they are today. Every operational detail that could have gone wrong routinely did go wrong. Naturally trains ended up in lakes, rivers, bogs, and other always available entrapment hazards. And because trains and locomotives were very heavy, they could be really hard to recover from these submersions in water and mire. All it took was time and labor, but if the cost of the effort exceeded the value of the entrapped equipment, it made more sense to just leave it. So there is nothing farfetched about losing railroad locomotives or rolling stock and never recovering them.

Furthermore, these losses did not necessarily make the headlines. Unless somebody was killed, many train wrecks were never even reported in the newspapers. So the physical loss of equipment was often accompanied by loss of the record of the physical loss, as may be the case with the Devils Lake legend.

When the early railroads were first constructed, excavation was limited by its cost. So railroads were built to avoid hills and valleys that required heavy excavation, but this created a lot of curves, which imposed their own cost in maintenance and compromised operational safety. In the later 1800s, the steam shovel was introduced. Combined with other new techniques, the steam shovel dramatically advanced the excavating art, which enabled many features of the original railroads to be improved by straightening curves and easing grades. This type of improvement came to Devils Lake in the form of a line relocation in the fall of 1889.

The railroad past Devils Lake was originally built as the Lake Superior & Mississippi Railroad in 1870. Later, it became part of the Northern Pacific Railway, and then the N.P. became part of the Burlington Northern Railroad in more recent times. Prior to the line relocation of 1889, heading north, the railroad approached the south end of Devils Lake with the intention of skirting the west shore and heading into Pine City. However there was a large hill at the southwest shore of the lake which posed an obstacle to the railroad. So, the line curved to the east to avoid the hill. That put it on course to head right into the lake from the south end. So after avoiding the big hill, the line quickly curved back to the west to avoid the lake as much as possible. However, this diversion still required a trestle to bridge over part of the lake water body, and the low ground on the west edge of the lake basin. Due to the limits of excavation during the earliest phases of railroad construction, it was cheaper to build trestles across low areas, lakes, and marshes rather than making earth fills to cross these obstacles.

During the 1889 line relocation, a large cut was made to pass through the big hill which the railroad had originally dodged by curving to the east. With the cut through the hill, the original curve to the east was less necessary. So by not swerving hard to the east to dodge the hill, the original curve recovering from that dodge could be eased somewhat because there was less deviation to recover from. In this way, the original "S"-curve at the south end of the lake was straightened somewhat, but not entirely eliminated. It remains today. This line relocation work also eliminated the trestle used in construction of the original track in 1870. Trestles were expensive to maintain, so it paid to eliminate them as line improvements were made over time.

The big cut through the hill yielded sufficient fill dirt to make an earth fill to replace the original trestle over the lake basin. It is likely that they hauled the dirt by railroad flat cars or dump cars from the cut to the trestle, and simply buried the trestle as they dumped the fill off of it and into the lake basin. Transporting excavated fill by a railroad system was typical of this earthmoving revolution made possible by the steam shovel. Sometimes, they built temporary, light narrow gage railroads to haul the fill, but in places where the line revision coincided with the old line, fill dirt was hauled on the line of the established railroad being improved. Considering that the old and new routes running along Devils Lake were approximately in the same location, it is likely that they simply used the old track to haul the fill dirt and buried the trestle in the process of replacing it with an earth fill.

Devils Lake is somewhat of a geological curiosity that may have lived up to its name if it did actually consume a locomotive or train. With a surface area of only 18 acres, and a depth of over eighty feet, it is like a caldron. It is part of a small chain of lakes starting with Cross lake, then south to Devils Lake, then to Squaw Lake, and then southwest to Rock lake. These lakes appear to be connected with a relationship to a surface swale of low and wet ground. I have heard that there may be an underground connection between the some of these lakes, but others have said that is not possible because they claim that the lake surfaces stand at different elevations. Whereas, if the lakes were connected, the surfaces would have to be at the same elevation.

But aside from the unusual depth in relation to its surface size and the possible connection to a subterranean watercourse, there is something else that is really mysterious about Devils Lake— and this is documented. I would call it the "smoking gun" in terms of strong evidence supporting the lost train legend. It is described in an article in the Pine County Pioneer dated March 15, 1889.

The article says that the trestle across the south end of Devils

Lake is in very bad condition, and is almost impossible to maintain because the west shore of the lake seems to be sliding down into the water. The article also notes that the railroad track has been known to move as much as six inches in a single night. They refer to this phenomenon as a "perpetual land-slide," and say that quite a distance to the west of the lake, there is a large crevice in the earth's surface that seems to be a break from which the landslide starts. They say that the railroad company should keep a watchman there night and day for the purpose of signaling trains in case the track is disrupted by the landslide. While not actually proving the legend to be true, these peculiar geological conditions surrounding the railroad's encounter with Devils Lake certainly set the stage for some kind of train wreck with the probability of that happening being so obvious that the newspaper warns of it. You could almost say that the writing was on the wall.

In considering the idea of a train lost in Devils Lake, one naturally suspects that the substantial depth of the lake played a prominent role in the loss and inability to recover. With the technology of over a century ago, connecting lifting cables to a fifty-ton locomotive in ninety feet of water would have been nearly impossible. Depending on the nature of the lake bottom, the engine might have been buried in mud besides being ninety feet underwater. However, the evidence of the legend involves the early trestle and "S"-curve, and these features were located at the south end of the lake where the water was relatively shallow. Therefore, it seems probable that a derailment causing the "lost train" would have put the train into the lake at its southern end, in the relatively shallow water. If that is the case, mud may have played a bigger role in the inability to recover railroad equipment than deep water did. The lost train may be simply mired in the mud 20-30 feet deep in relatively shallow water at the south end of the lake near the existing railroad fill.

Around 1990, this legend came up in an article by Don Boxmire in the St. Paul Pioneer Press. That is when I first heard about it. At that time, I contacted the Pine City Historical Society and was referred to Anna Vach who had researched the legend. I corresponded with her and she provided the newspaper clipping of the March 15, 1889 article about the perpetual landslide hazard to the trains passing Devils Lake. She also told me the following story that she had been told by someone who presumably lived in Pine City during the late 1800s. Anna wrote, "One story fascinated me, it was when first I was told of the train disappeared into Devils Lake."

In her letter, she recounted the story as follows: "They heard the northbound coming, blowing the whistle, but it never came into Pine City. Upon investigation, they found only the land slide and train tracks leading into Devils Lake." Anna continued, "Forty years later I received a letter, from a lady, and she was told the same story by her grandfather."

A verbal account may or may not be true, but this one does happen to perfectly correlate with the train hazard of the perpetual landslide that we know is a historically documented fact according to the newspaper article. Taken all together, I believe that there is a very high probability that there is truth behind the legend. Assuming that the railroad line relocation of 1889 tamed the landslide hazard, the lost train incident probably occurred as a train derailment in the timeframe of 1870-1889. With the historical record apparently offering no account of the incident, it seems quite possible that nobody was killed. Although, I know of no local newspapers that go back further than 1877, so that leaves the first seven years of the railroad activity unreported in local newspapers. If there were fatalities or even serious injuries in the derailment, it may have been picked up by the Minneapolis, St. Paul, or Duluth papers which covered that earlier timeframe.

If a freight train were derailed due to encountering track that had been shifted by the landslide, the locomotive and several freight cars may have run into the water. Perhaps they were able to pull some of them out, but maybe not all of them. The locomotive would have probably gone in the furthest, and its heavier weight would have made it the most unrecoverable. But, whatever equipment may have been left in the lake, it would have qualified as the "lost train" of the legend.

I speculate that the train would have been a freight train rather than a passenger train, although either type is possible. But a passenger train would have been carrying many people, thus posing a much greater risk of death or injury. As I have mentioned, fatalities were almost certain to have been reported in newspapers and other records. So, in a general sense, the lost history nature of this legend suggests that there were no fatalities, and certainly not a large number of them as would be quite probable if a passenger train went into the lake. With a freight train, only two or three men would have been in the locomotive cab, and thus at immediate risk of death in a derailment.

In addition, railroaders were a hardy lot, and they were used to dodging the numerous perils of train running. Freight trains of the pioneering era operated at much lower speeds than the standards of today, but like today, the early trains could not stop quickly, so jumping off the locomotive to survive a pileup was often the practical solution. Keeping a lookout for trouble ahead was the rule of the day for self-preservation. And many an engineer and fireman avoided certain death by jumping off their locomotive before it struck another train, landslide, washed-out or burning trestle, or boulder on the track. In the understated whimsy of railroad slang, jumping from the locomotive to save your life was called "joining the birds."

Therefore, it is quite possible that a derailment at Devils Lake put the train into the water without any loss of life if the engineer and fireman saw the impending derailment, and jumped off before the engine went into the lake. Or they may have ridden it into the lake and escaped the cab after the engine went into the water.

Another high probability is that the "lost train" was associated with the construction work of the line relocation. We know this involved heavy excavation and filling into the lake. Even though they may have run fill trains on the main line track of the old route, they likely also laid some temporary track to connect into the excavating work. Generally, this type of makeshift track operation is prone to derailments. While they were usually of little consequence, fresh fill being placed into a body of water became completely saturated and took a long time to finally stabilize, so it could carry weight. In the meantime, the soft fill was always happy to swallow some errant piece of construction equipment such as locomotives or dump cars of the fill train.

There are people who restore old railroad equipment as a hobby. To them, the stories of lost trains and locomotives spark interest in finding free equipment to restore. But the objects of "lost train" legends are never free. They persist in their entrapped predicament precisely due to the unbearable cost of their recovery which was the reason why they were abandoned in the first place. And even if one could be recovered with the aid of a more modernized method that was not available when it was lost, the deterioration resulting from a long burial or submersion will make restoration to operating condition a most

difficult proposition.

The prize that lost train legends more commonly offer is the lost history of their story about how a train or locomotive came to be sunken into a lake or bog and simply left there for the rest of time. What happened on that one day so long ago? Railroad locomotives and rolling stock are extremely durable and heavily built, so even though they deteriorate when submerged or buried, they last a long time. Though inaccessible, the memory of them lives on, so they remain as a silent witness to the mystery of their story.

Indeed, it is the story that fades away over time as it is passed down from one generation to the next. The most significant part of the story is the fact that the train equipment was never recovered. So as the story fades, the lack of recovery hangs on as the one fact that remains in the collective human memory of the area. If it were not for that one most memorable detail, the mishap would have been forgotten a long time ago. But that one detail etched into general memory turns the story into a legend. It is the nature of legends that while they never die, the facts surrounding their origin fade away and are lost forever. The Devils Lake legend is almost past that threshold of permanent loss unless some tireless historical researcher can catch up with it and bring it back.

~~~
~~~