

The Wreck of Engine 76

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Although there were many derailments on the Montour Railroad over the years, most of these incidents caused no significant damage or injuries. The slow speed of Montour coal trains limited the scope of any such accident. Many derailments were caused by wide gauge, where heavy tonnage would push the tracks too far apart and the car wheels would drop down between the rails and onto the ties. Occasionally a broken rail would cause a coal hopper or two to overturn, spilling their loads along the right-of-way, but very few injuries occurred.

One of the most memorable accidents happened 40 years ago, in October, 1974. A Montour train designated Extra 76 West was crossing the McDonald Viaduct with 45 car loads of coal destined for the Champion Preparation Plant near Imperial. Locomotive #76 was leading the train onto the long straight section near the current trail rest area (Trail Mile 17.3) and as it passed the east switch of McDonald Siding, Engineer Jim Lane and Brakeman Dave Sherwood saw a flat car with a large earth moving scraper aboard rolling toward them on the main track.

Both crew members jumped to their feet and, after setting the air brakes into the emergency position, they made their way out of the rear door of the locomotive cab and “joined the birds” – jumping off the slow moving train just a few seconds before the runaway flat car struck the front end of engine 76.

The flat car and the train met with a severe impact and the earth mover slid off the end of the flat car, crashing into the locomotive. A large vapor cloud rose from the smashed radiator of the locomotive, its big diesel engine was dislodged and the long hood was pushed into the cab. Thankfully, no one was injured and, amazingly, nothing even derailed, but 76 was badly damaged.



Note the impression of the earth mover's front bumper in 76's body and radiator.

Charles A. Ross photo

The accident investigation determined that a crew of men, working at McAdams Siding a mile or so up the line, had been preparing to unload the earth mover to deliver it to a local coal stripping company. The men were moving the flat car uphill on the siding, using a large truck to pull the rail car with a cable. Something went wrong and the cable became detached. The flat car started rolling back down the siding with no one aboard to secure the hand brake and stop the car. It rolled over a switch and out onto the main line, heading downhill eastbound on the main track until it met the westbound coal train.

After the accident, Engine 76 was taken to Montour Junction and later moved to the McKees Rocks shops of the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, where it was rebuilt using both new and used parts and accessories. It was returned to the Montour Railroad in early 1976, ready to resume service, but in need of a final coat of paint, which was to be applied by the Montour shops.

As this was the Bicentennial year, several Montour employees suggested 76 should be painted with a Bicentennial theme. Montour employees came up with a paint scheme and the 76 was painted red, white and blue with stars along the cab and hood.



Chuck Ross poses with 76 and contributed this photo.

When 76 was returned to service in 1976 it was intended to be used as a showcase engine to lead trains, but the train crews quickly found out it was noisy and had severe vibrations which gave the crew a rough ride. Thereafter, the crews usually requested that #76 be buried as the second or third unit of a locomotive consist.

#76 continued to work on the Montour until 1981, when the entire fleet of diesel locomotives was retired and sold.

Thanks go to Gene Schaeffer, Robert J. Lane, Tim Sposato and the late Chuck Ross, ex-Montour employees who contributed information and pictures to this report.



Montour Railroad employees Rich Magga, Bob Gorley and Roy Parkinson pose aboard engine 76 at the Montour Junction shops as it was readied for service in 1976.

Charles A. Ross photo

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