

Fr. O'Brien reflects on train tragedy and family railroad history

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 12 April 2013 13:33 -



Grandfather killed by locomotive century ago.

Denis O'Brien likely never knew what struck him.

Or that two tragedies would link him forever to a spot on the rails beside the train depot in Gothenburg.

For much of his life, the Union Pacific Railroad engineer piloted locomotives through Nebraska.

On March 14, 1913, Denis was at the helm of eastbound train No. 4 that steamed into the Gothenburg depot for coal and passengers.

In the midst of a roaring blizzard, the No. 4 was rear-ended by another train whose engineer didn't see the signal lights while approaching the depot.

Four people died that snowy morning and more than 20 were injured.

Denis, who was uninjured, helped pull people from the wreckage, according to his grandson the Rev. Don O'Brien.

O'Brien is pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Gothenburg and Christ the King Church in Cozad.

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Although Denis died before Fr. O'Brien was born, the priest remembers—from news and family accounts—what happened on April 5, 1913.

"I never knew him but I want to honor his death," he said. "He loved the railroad. It was his life."

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Less than three weeks after the first calamity, Denis was the engineer on the No. 9 that had stopped for coal in Gothenburg.

"He was oiling the wheels and stepped back far enough to be struck by the pilot beam as the No. 8 passed, running about 40 mph," according to the April 11, 1913, issue of The Gothenburg Times.

Thrown against his own engine, Denis's skull was fractured and his right arm broken.

O'Brien said the noise of the escaping steam from the other train kept his grandfather from hearing the approaching train.

"He was killed within a few feet of where his engine stood the night of the wreck," the newspaper said.

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O'Brien frequently passes by where the old railroad depot used to stand, on the southeast quadrant of Highway 30 and Lake Avenue, before it was moved to Lafayette Park.

And he thinks about the grandfather he never knew.

"When I first came here, I realized I was going to be in the place where my grandfather died," he said.

O'Brien also imagines how railroad workers would load up the locomotives with coal and water "to keep 'em running."

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The Union Pacific Railroad determined the location of towns like Gothenburg that sprang up alongside its rails.

"Trains brought people West," O'Brien said.

Including the first generation of O'Briens that paved the way for five more who followed.

Edmund O'Brien, O'Brien's great grandfather, helped build the New York Central and the Chicago and Rock Island railroads.

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After leaving the railroad in 1861, Edmund homesteaded in Hall County in 1861, according to a Union Pacific news article. O'Brien's nephew, Patrick O'Brien, traces the family's railroading history in the article.

Five years later, Edmund and his oxen hauled cottonwood trees from islands in the flooding Platte River for use as ties in the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, according to Patrick, a fifth-generation railroader who works as a Union Pacific signal maintenance manager.

Edmund's son, Denis, began his railroading career as a wiper in Grand Island before becoming a locomotive engineer and later a passenger train engineer between North Platte and Grand Island before he was killed.

Denis's son, Donald, is O'Brien's father. Patrick said Donald often visited his grandparents in their log home in Hall County, which was a mile north of the tracks.

"He could hear his father's whistle from a distance and would run out to wave as the steam engine passed," Patrick wrote.

Donald joined the UP as a store trucker in the North Platte freight house at age 17 and became chief clerk in 1932.

"It was good employment and good money," O'Brien said. "He made \$2 an hour."

For six summers, O'Brien—who grew up in North Platte—also worked in the freight house where he transferred goods to freight cars just like his father.

"It was one of the best educations in the school of hard knocks," he said with a laugh. "I learned to have empathy for people who work hard and who are poor."

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Many Irish, when they immigrated to the United States, were poor and found jobs building railroads, O'Brien said.

In fact, a colony of Irish settled in Willow Island and built St. Patrick's Church which closed in the mid 1940s, he said.

O'Brien women were also involved with the railroad as several worked at the North Platte Canteen feeding and entertaining World War II soldiers who passed through on trains.

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O'Brien said it's remarkable to have six generations of O'Briens involved in the Union Pacific Railroad.

The sixth generation is Edmond, Patrick's nephew, who works as a signal maintainer in North Platte.

"The Union Pacific Railroad is one of the main industries in the county and in the country," O'Brien said. "And it's a pretty big game yet."

With 135 trains passing through central Nebraska daily, on tracks that have grown from one to three, O'Brien pointed out that it's the busiest rail freight corridor in America.

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