

April 23, 1940.

Mr. T. Byron Lally,  
242 Wychwood Avenue,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Dear Byron:

If I was as mean as you, I wouldn't tell you about the catastrophe which descended upon our fair city at 11:40 P.M., April 19th.

I had been lying on the davenport reading and had fallen asleep, and Marian sat across the room listening to the radio and sewing when a terrific crash was heard. She immediately awakened me and told me that something terrible must have happened because our house shook violently and the bridge lamp under which she had been working very nearly tipped over. She went down to the foot of the stairs and shouted back that there were people running down Ward Street. I didn't become too excited because from her description I thought the Götter house, which has been full of a mysterious gas for quite some time, had blown up. However, I started in the direction of Ward Street, scantily clad, and soon heard someone shout that there had been a train wreck. Naturally, from where our house is located, it only took me five minutes to get there, and I never hoped to see such a horrible scene as greeted my eyes as I broke over the top of the embankment adjacent to the first bridge of the Dolgeville railroad which crosses old Route 5. There was a tangled mass of wreckage, hissing steam, screams and cries of the injured and dying, with practically total darkness. You see, when the train left the track, it completely demolished all of the telephone and light wires, and the wires which were hanging were striking violent arcs as they dragged across the steel coaches. The fireman was thrown clear of the wreckage and lay just this side of the Dolgeville railroad bridge in the middle of the pavement on old Route 5. One of the fellows who was running along side of me stepped on him. He was practically covered with debris, but his head, one shoulder and one arm were exposed. The crash must have been terrific to throw him that distance. The engine which had been headed west, was pointing toward the hospital, and the tender and two coaches were over in the roadway. The other coaches and Pullmans had piled up in back of the engine and were a twisted mass of steel.

Troopers from the East Herkimer substation arrived within a few minutes. Being very well acquainted with Corporal Dorn, I shouted, "For Christ's sake, why don't you get some acetylene torches and get these people out?",

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and he answered, "We have sent to Utica for them". I replied, "Why in hell did you send to Utica? There are plenty of units in the city", and he said, "If you know where they are, get them." I spied Charlie Nellis and called to him to learn if he had his car. He said he did, and we ran to it, climbed in, and started for the plant. The same thought must have gone through the minds of other people because as we drove around the Grange Store corner, there were two fellows waiting at the factory entrance doorway. We summoned the night watchman, and while the welders were collecting the units, the watchman and I ran downstairs to get the company truck. He opened the door and I drove the truck out of the John St. ramp and around to the Albany St. loading platform where the fellows had the welding units on the two wheel trucks and were waiting. We loaded the heavy units on the truck and started up Albany Street. George Roedel took the wheel and I stood on the running board of Charlie Nellis' car waving a flashlight because with the number of private cars, taxis, and ambulances screaming back and forth with the injured, we otherwise would not have gotten through. They allowed us, however, to drive within a few feet of the derailed engine. In other words, we parked just a short distance from the dead fireman, who was still in the road, wheeled the outfit down to the wreck, and ran our torch up the side of the engine and into the cab where we proceeded to cut Engineer Earl loose. Immediately it was apparent that something was needed to protect the people who were being extricated, so I grabbed a fellow with a red cross on his arm, who happened to be Dick Rasch, and we rushed back to the plant together with Harold Ferguson and picked up a roll of asbestos paper. After tearing enough of this paper to protect the engineer, and while the rest of the fellows were working on him, two other fellows and I crawled through one of the Pullman cars, which was over on its side in the roadway, and in complete darkness except for small hand flashlights, and over great obstacles, - berths and sides of seats, we succeeded in removing three women. These three women were dead, however, but it was so dark and everyone was so completely excited that it wasn't until an hour or so later that we began to examine the people before moving them. By examining them, I mean we would feel for a heartbeat or pulse, and if we detected none, we would lay them aside and go on to the next one. In this way, we believed that several who were still alive were taken out that would have been neglected otherwise.

It is impossible for me to relate everything that happened as it would take a half a day, but the train master finally sent us down on the other side of the wreck to the car which was immediately under the engine's wheels, and by breaking the glass out of one of the windows (this car was also on its side), we lowered ourselves through and groped around in the dimly lit interior and found 6 more bodies.

In going through one car, the fellow ahead of me opened a compartment door and there sat an elderly gent, fully clothed, erect in his seat, without a mark on him. He was, of course, quite dead. Going through one of the Pullmans, I noticed a man in an upper berth in his pajamas, and he had been split right straight through his body to his shoulder blades. The woman in the berth below was horribly mangled and had her left leg severed at the crotch.

All of this time, of course, there were hundreds of other people doing all they could to assist in any way possible. The power company men arrived on the scene and erected floodlights as quickly as possible. The telephone men dropped emergency lines to instruments placed along the rocks. People



in the immediate vicinity took the injured into their homes. Doctors, nurses, and ambulances were summoned from all surrounding cities, except Dolgeville, and drug stores remained open all night and furnished everything asked for in the way of medical supplies. We continued cutting people from the wreckage until our oxygen supply was exhausted, which occurred at 10 minutes to 5 Saturday morning. I asked the wrecking master if he wanted us to get additional oxygen, and he replied that it was of little use because the people who could not be taken out had already died and the ones on whom we were working could not be removed until the car was pulled apart.

Naturally, the whole town has been deeply shocked by this tragedy and it is certainly very hard to get back in the harness and concentrate on business or our normal duties.

Over Sunday a conservative estimate was made of the number of automobiles which arrived in town, and the estimate was placed at 200,000. The city was practically devoid of food. Hotels and restaurants had finally gotten to the point where a hot dog was equivalent to a 7 course dinner. The night of the wreck, coffee was at a premium. It didn't seem as if enough could be brewed to handle the situation. There were many heroes, of course, but in the main the credit, if one can use that term, is certainly due to the townspeople themselves and especially the hospital, doctors and nurses. Dr. Ashley told me that not one case which had been admitted to the hospital had been lost. It seemed that everyone had something to do, and regardless of their own desires, they performed their duties wonderfully well. For example, some men remained at the street intersections and directed traffic, keeping the highway open of course for doctors and ambulances and also taxis carrying injured people. Other men handled steaming 5 gallon cans of hot coffee which in itself was a precarious position in which to be, climbing over the wreckage with scalding coffee in metal containers. There were housewives in the immediate neighborhood right down in the entire mass with towels and buckets of water, doing what they could to ease the suffering. The doctors and nurses, of course, performed their duties, the telephone men stuck to their job, the firemen to theirs, the fellows with acetylene torches to theirs, and the rest of us went through the wreckage in pitch darkness hauling out the dead and dying.

There are many other pitiful scenes which I have not related, but I believe what I have already told you will give a graphic picture of the worst catastrophe we in Little Falls ever hoped to witness.

Some other fellows in the plant who worked like Trojans were George Roedel, Bob Duesler, Harold Ferguson, Tom Scatchard, and Charlie Nellis. There were many others, of course, but the confusion was so great, it was hard to tell one from another, especially after our faces became blackened with soot and our hands and clothing saturated with blood.

I will write further concerning this disaster later.

Cordially,

Lee