

Why Locomotives Had Cow Catchers

Train mishaps were common, and occasionally, uncommon

Computer geeks know that Charles Babbage, an English mathematician, philosopher, inventor and mechanical engineer, originated the concept of a digital programmable computer. That was in the mid 1800's and it eventually led to more complex electronic designs, though all the essential ideas of modern computers are to be found in Babbage's analytical engine. It was a long time before technology caught up with his ideas.

But another of his many inventions was put to use fairly early on.

In 1830 Babbage was a passenger on the opening run of the Manchester and Liverpool railroad line. One can only speculate about the details of that journey, but his interest in rail travel led to the invention of a plow-shaped device to be mounted on the front of the steam engine for the purpose of rapidly removing any obstruction on the rails. At first they called it a "pilot," but in rural North America, it acquired its more common name. We

know it as the "cow catcher," the more technically correct "cattle catcher," or the more graphic descriptor...the cow plow.

Even this invention was not seized upon right away. Instead, European railways fenced the tracks. But in America, reports of trains being derailed by cattle were common in the early days of railroading, and it was especially problematic in the wide-open west where livestock weren't often fenced in. Even a good

-sized hog could derail a train—you can imagine that encountering a buffalo on the tracks was a real obstacle.

You don't see cow catchers on modern locomotives. The bison are long gone and one seldom sees a cow running free.

But it happens.

On October 21, 1948, a freight train approaching Medora from the east encountered just such a free-range cow, sleeping, or at least resting, on the track. If said locomotive had a cow-catcher, it didn't seem to

work. One freight car jumped the track and rolled, just east of the Station House. The engine and caboose stayed on track but another fifteen cars got by the station before rolling off the track and into a heap.

Thankfully, no one was hurt, but if the cars had left the track just a little bit sooner, they surely would have wrecked the station house or worse.

Farmers from near and far came with grain trucks to gather up the spilled grain. Two days later railway crews had everything up and running again at a cost of about \$50,000.

The whole episode was celebrated in true small town style by local poet C.J. Barnes in his modest epic, "The Drowsy Cow," which was published in the local paper. Another local poet took it another step with a response – from the point of view of the cow.

You know an event is epic if the poets weigh in on the story!

Sources:

Brenda History Committee. *Bridging Brenda* Vol. 1. Altona. Friesen Printers, 1990
Waskada Memoirs. Morden. Morden Commercial Printers, 1967

Note: Did you know that there is a "Cowcatcher Magazine"? It is about model railroading.

▼ This engine is equipped with the plow-shaped "Cow Catcher" on its nose to move things off the track.



▼ The wreckage from the derailment in Medora caused by a sleeping cow on the track.

