The 1903 Brandon Bridge Collapse

On September 4, 1903 the wooden approach to the First Street Bridge gave way as a new Port Huron steam engine was moving across the approach to get onto the actual bridge span across the Assiniboine River. The engine fell some 20 feet to the river bank below, landing upside down. Tragically the operators, William Curle and Richard Chambers, lost their lives in this accident as they were caught beneath the engine. William Curle farmed in the Justice, Manitoba area. Richard Chambers was an employee of the Brandon agent for the Port Huron Company.

William Curle's parents had moved from Glasgow, Scotland to Mount Forrest, Ontario and then on to Stonewall, Manitoba in 1878. In 1881, the Curle family moved to a homestead in the Justice district north of Brandon, Manitoba. William Curle was born in 1843 in Scotland. In 1881, William Curle took up his own homestead in the Justice district, NW 24-12-18. Previous to this, William had been a fireman stoking boilers on steam ships on the Great Lakes. William appears to have prospered as he owned a portable steam engine by 1900. In 1903, he decided to purchase a steam traction engine and settled on a new Port Huron engine. He took delivery in Brandon and had to move the engine home himself. It was on this move that he had to travel over the First Street Bridge. Richard Chambers accompanied Mr. Curle for some reason, perhaps to aid him driving the engine as the bridge and associated street would have lots of traffic.

Unfortunately, little is known about Richard Chambers at this time.

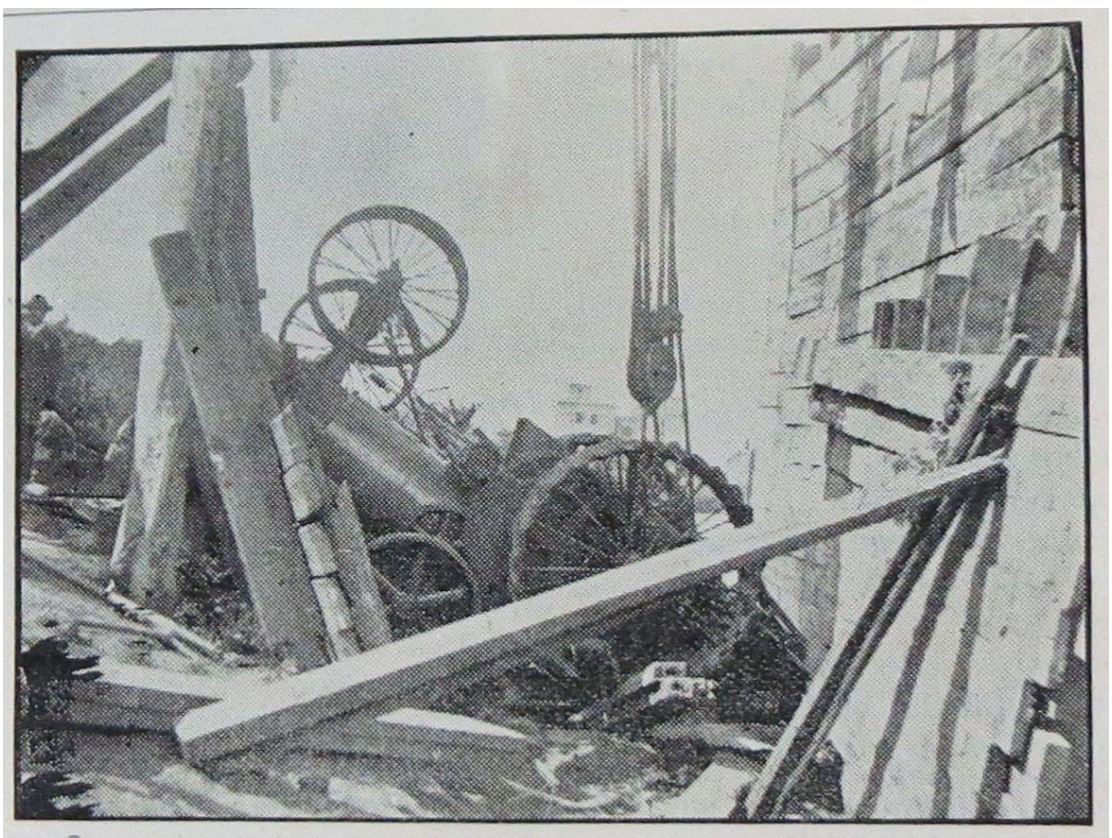
Bridge collapses caused by a steam engine moving over the bridge were a not uncommon occurrence in the Pioneer era. There were a variety of reasons for these collapses. Treated or creosoted timbers were not commonly used at the time in municipal bridges leading to rapid deterioration of bridges. However the chief cause was that many bridges were built too lightly for steam engines which were rapidly evolving. Farmers wanted more power which in turn meant steam engines became bigger and heavier. Many bridges built previous to 1900 were built with the idea that they would carry nothing heavier than a loaded grain wagon. Grain wagons at the time usually carried around 30 bushels of wheat or approximately 1800 pounds with perhaps the wagon weighing another 1000 pounds along with a team that, depending on the breed of horses used, may weigh another 2000 pounds for a total weight around 5000 pounds. Steam engines rapidly exceeded this weight between the metal in the machine and the necessary fuel and water that the engine had to carry. So moving engines over bridges was always fraught with the danger that the bridge would give way. There are reports from this time that a custom thresher at Chater, Manitoba just east of Brandon always moved to a custom job just north of Brandon by railing his equipment on the CPR branch line that used to run from Chater to Minnedosa via Forrest, Manitoba. The line ran close enough to the farm they were going to and there were handy loading docks to load and unload machinery. Of course in those days, railways were more accommodating to local traffic. But the use of the branch line indicates the issues involved in moving steam engines around the countryside.

Soon after the accident, William Curle's sons retrieved the engine. An attached photo shows the engine upside down under the bridge with a heavy rope fall (block and tackle) hanging above the engine. Today with modern cranes, backhoes and bulldozers this job would be a morning's work. In the Pioneer era when all the Curle brothers may have had was access to heavy timbers, a heavy rope fall and perhaps a couple of heavy jacks, righting this engine would have been a daunting task. Close examination of the image indicates that the rope fall was being attached to the center of the rear wheel visible and, if so, it appears that they were going to roll the engine over on to its side and then roll it on to its wheels. Once on its wheels it would have been relatively easy to move the engine up the river bank. In this case the rope fall was probably attached above the engine to heavy timbers running between the bridge pier visible on the right and timber piles visible on the left. One question is whether the Curle brothers were using teams of horses to pull on the free end of the rope fall or whether they had a winch of some sort. Unfortunately the photo does not show details of how the rope fall was operated.

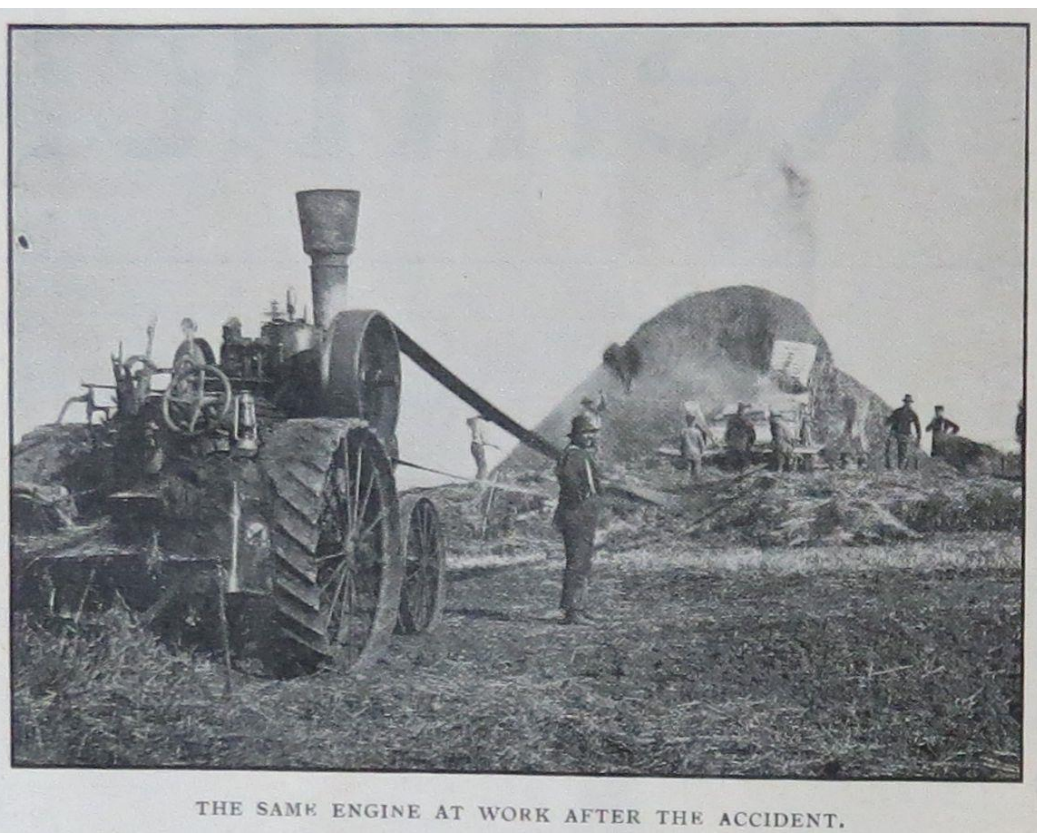
However the Curle Brothers managed to do it, they retrieved the engine and made the necessary repairs to it which cost the grand sum of $67 according to reports at the time. One of the images accompanying this release shows the engine at work threshing later in the fall of 1903. This image is interesting by itself as it appears that the Curles were threshing from stacks as there are sheaves piled on the ground ahead of the thresher and no sheaf wagons are visible. As no snow is visible on the ground one wonders what changed as it was less work to feed the sheaves into the thresher as the wagons hauled them in. Stacking the sheaves was usually done when bin space ran out and the grain handling system had no space for further deliveries. Sheaves were then stacked to protect them from the weather. In this time period, the grain handling system rapidly became "plugged" at harvest due to the rapid expansion of acres under cultivation. As grain movement to the east largely stopped when the Great Lakes froze over, sheave stacks were normally threshed in the spring when movement resumed. The thresher does not appear to have a self-feeder but rather a table on which the sheaves were forked and then pushed into the machine by hand after the twine was cut. The machine also appears to have an apron stacker but yet the straw pile is higher than the stacker. As apron stackers did not throw the straw too far, how the straw pile got so high would be interesting to determine.

On Sunday July 31, 2016 the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and the Manitoba Agricultural Museum will host Harvesting Hope: a World Record to Help the Hungry. To help end global hunger, over 500 volunteers from 100 communities across Canada will operate 125 early 20th century threshing machines to harvest a 100 acre crop of wheat. When in operation, the equipment will require over four football fields of space. For more information on attending or how to participate please visit http://www.harvestinghope.ca/ or follow us on twitter @harvesthope2016

September 20, 2015 is Open Farm Day at the Museum. Open Farm Day is an event in partnership with Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; and the Museum invites visitors to come and check out their rural roots! The Manitoba Agricultural Museum is open year round, and operates a website at http://ag-museum.mb.ca/ which can provide visitors with information on the Museum including location and hours of operation.



THE ENGINE LYING BOTTOM UPWARDS UNDER BRIDGE.



THE SAME ENGINE AT WORK AFTER THE ACCIDENT.