



INDUSTRY TRAILBLAZERS: 2004

James J. Sirois

Mr. James J. Sirois has a lifetime affiliation with railroading. He exemplifies many like him whose dedication has ensured that railways have safely moved freight and passenger traffic in Canada for more than 150 years.

Mr. Sirois began his career with Canadian National in the late 1940s as a clerk. By 1950 he was working as a brakeman and then qualified as a conductor. His world became the CN mainline linking Québec City, Rivière-du-Loup, and Edmundston, New Brunswick.

In 1955, he left CN and participated in the development of the Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railway. He spent 36 years of his life on the QNS&L, working as a brakeman, a conductor, and a locomotive engineer.

Mr. Sirois was also active in the railway union movement prior to becoming a manager. During his tenure with the United Transportation Union, he was able to positively contribute to many improvements in working conditions that would be later implemented on the railway.

In 1960, Mr. Sirois was active in the start-up of the Québec-Cartier Railway between Port-Cartier and Gagnon, Quebec, and served as the Cartier Railway conductor on opening day. In the same period, he participated to the construction of the Northernland Railway, linking QNS&L at mileage 224 in Labrador City to Wabush.

Vince Coleman

P. Vincent ("Vince") Coleman has become known as a true Canadian hero, and is another in a list of brave railroaders whose valiant actions have saved the lives of others. It is fitting therefore that he has been inducted into the Canadian Railway Hall of Fame "Heroes" category for 2004. Much has been written of the deadly Halifax Explosion that took the lives of over 2000 people on the fateful morning of December 6, 1917. It was the worst disaster to have occurred in Canadian history. In Halifax harbour at 08:45 that morning, two ships—a Belgian relief ship named Imo and a French steamship known as the Mont Blanc—collided as a result of misunderstood signals after the Mont Blanc was forced into an improper course while entering the harbour. The Mont Blanc was loaded with munitions, including picric acids and dynamite. The railway yards were located adjacent the harbour, near the site of the collision. Soon after the collision, fire broke out on the Mont Blanc and black smoke and flames began to billow into the morning sky. As the crowds gathered to watch, unaware of the pending danger, a warning was given by a sailor to employees in the railway freight yards to evacuate now, as an explosion was about to occur.

Realizing the peril of the situation, Vince Coleman, a telegraph operator for the Canadian Government Railways who had heeded the warning to evacuate and began to leave the railway yards for safer ground turned back to the telegraph office. He remembered that within minutes, the passenger train from Boston to Halifax was due and the train must be warned of the impending peril and disaster that was about to occur.



Mr. Coleman was successful in getting his message over the wire to stop the train prior to its arrival in Halifax, and at 09:06, disaster struck, killing 2000 people and injuring many more. Mr. Coleman, then 45 years old, died in the line of duty but his actions saved the lives of over 700 railway passengers.

Mr. Coleman was survived by his wife Frances. He is buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery—Halifax.