



In a memorial ceremony held at the Essex Railway Station, Aug. 24, a plaque was unveiled commemorating two trainmen who lost their lives in Essex's 1907 explosion. Officiating at the unveiling were, from left, Wilber Brett, president of Heritage Essex, Cheryl Skilton and Bill Gay.

Heritage Essex honours men lost to 1907 explosion

BY ANDY COMBER

"In my heart, the steam train will always last."

That line was part of a poem read at a ceremony at the Essex Railway Station last Friday night, honouring two trainmen who lost their lives when a railcar loaded with nitroglycerine exploded in Essex on August 10, 1907.

"The mists of time tend to obscure events," said Bill Gay, interim station manager, speaking to about 40 people who attended a plaque unveiling in memory of Michigan Central train crewmen Joseph McNary and Leo Conlon, both from Amherstburg.

"One hundred years ago

this month, a horrific explosion occurred on these very grounds," said Gay, detailing the events that led to the death of the two men.

Gay said the deadly explosion was triggered by a collision between two boxcars at the Essex station, one leaking improperly packed explosives from a shipment of 5,000 pounds of nitroglycerine.

"The shock from the resulting explosion was felt as far away as Detroit, where they thought an earthquake had struck," Gay said, "Incredibly, with the station full of people waiting to board the train, only two trainmen were killed."

"We are here to remember them tonight," he said.

The memorial ceremony included a welcome by Heritage Essex President Wilber Brett, and greetings from Essex Mayor Ron McDermott.

"Most people that come to Essex, they visit our train station. It's a plus for us," McDermott said. "It is one of our brightest spots."

Fitting to the occasion, Marlene Markham read a poem reminiscent of the days "steam ruled the rails."

During the plaque unveiling, two candles were lit by Cheryl Skilton, promotion manager for the Essex Railway Station, in remembrance of Conlon

and McNary.

"We carry these two brakemen into the future. They are part of our history," Brett said, revealing the plaque. "We give thanks for this."

A special selection of music was presented throughout the ceremony, sung by the barbershop quartet "Generation Gap," featuring area residents, William Humphrey, Bob Grymonprez, Sam Cornett, and Jim Hatt. Hatt also read a dedication prayer.

The events of the 1907 explosion were examined in detail in a feature article written by Daniel Schwab, which appeared in the August 8 edition of the Essex Free Press.

ESSEX MATTERS:

Taxation since amalgamation

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At the same time, the province changed the way education is funded. Prior to 1998, each school board set its own tax rate, to be collected by the municipality on behalf of the boards. In 1999, the funding model changed. Now the province collects about half of the cost of education through property taxes and uses a common rate. The amount being paid for education through our property taxes is still about \$1 million less than it was in 1998.

I guess another factor to consider is annual growth rates. Total assessment grows from one to three per cent each year due to new construction, so even a flat tax rate would bring in a

few more dollars.

Given these factors, I wouldn't even want to guess at what the average increase is. I can say with certainty that, for the local portion of the tax bill, on a percentage basis, the increase has been highest in Ward Two and lowest in Ward One.

Why is that?

That is due to equalization of tax rates across the municipality. The amalgamation order included a provision for tax rates to be equalized during the first five years, and that is what happened. Colchester North had the lowest starting rate, so that went up the most. The former Town of Essex had the highest rate, so it went up the least.

Including the local, county and education portions of the tax bills, the increase in the total amount of taxes collected has increased 26 per cent in Ward One, 30 per cent in Ward Three and 37 per cent in Wards Two and Four.

Any indication of where taxes might be going for the next few years?

It's difficult to guess at that, but a few positive things are happening. The federal gas tax transfer will be fully rolled in by 2009 and is guaranteed until 2011. By 2009, our share will exceed \$1 million every year. This money goes towards our road and bridge plan.

General provincial funding is increasing as well

and will go up by more than \$1 million in the next two years. The province just last week announced that it will be funding a greater share of social costs beginning next year. This will leave the county with more room to either catch up on necessary road work or reduce the county tax rate.

The education portion of the tax bill has been fairly constant since the province changed the funding formula in the late 90's, so we don't anticipate an increase there. As for the local portion, I don't foresee any major increases.

This week we talked about tax revenues. Next week we'll focus on "Other Revenues".

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