

Scottsburg Fire Chief Jim Richey and several volunteers knew it was going to be an eventful Saturday, May 17, when, as the men stood at Fire Station 2 in downtown Scottsburg, train cars suddenly slowed to a complete stop. The time was 8:30 a.m. “When those brakes (on railcars) started to grab, all you could hear was ‘Boom, boom, boom.’ It was really loud. Our immediate thought was a vehicle got hit somewhere along the line,” Chief Richey recalled.

Fortunately, that wasn’t what happened. Instead, at least five vehicle-carrying, double-decker rail cars jumped the tracks beside what is still called the “old corn factory,” a brick structure that once housed a busy canning operation each summer owned by Morgan Foods Inc. The ruins are now owned by the Kenneth Baldwin family. The factory sits at the far east end adjacent to a portion of Lake Lola in north Scottsburg.

The unidentified engineer at the controls of the diesel-driven train engine did a remarkable job of bringing the long train to a halt, even though the jolt of those five or so cars jumping the tracks caused the two engines to partially derail as well. Both locomotives remained upright, and there was no fire nor leak of diesel from the engines’ huge fuel tank reserves that ride under each engine.

What the train company definitely had was quite a mess on its hands. The tracks are owned by the Louisville and Indianapolis Railroad headquartered in Jeffersonville. The engines, nos. 8613 and 8614, were marked CSX, the train company partnering with the L&I to improve the tracks so that up to 17 trains can make the journey to and from Indianapolis and other destinations daily.

Those plans are to be realized within the next five years,

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according to information received earlier this year by this newspaper. Installation of a “seamless” rail will enable the L&I track to handle more – and longer and larger – train loads.

Why the cargo cars directly in back of the engines jumped the tracks is still a matter of speculation. Rumors of unknown persons placing foreign objects on the track are unfounded. What may be possible is that one of the many repaired areas to the steel track in the vicinity of the corn factory simply did not hold. Rail that was once straight was seen lying by the track bed with a decided curve to it.

Nonetheless, as Scottsburg Mayor Bill Graham noted later, “If it had to happen, we were extremely fortunate it happened where it did. The city was inconvenienced, but no chemicals were spilled, no one was hurt, and property damage was held to a minimum. That in itself was an out-and-out miracle.”

Photos of the derailed cars, all filled with brand new Toyota mini-vans, Nissan Ultimas and small Chevy SUVs from factories in Indiana and Kentucky, nearly immediately began popping

up on Facebook as nearby residents, attracted by the booming sounds, visited the scene and snapped photos with their smartphones. Scottsburg police, Indiana State Police and the Sheriff's Department all turned out, some officers to direct traffic and others to assist at the derailment.

The crash closed all crossings in Scottsburg. Motorists either had to go to Marshfield Road to the north or to Lovers Lane on the south side to travel over the rails. Lovers Lane was down to one lane because of the train's final car coming to rest halfway in the westbound lane. Large trucks and commercial vans were directed to use State Road 356 south of Scottsburg.

At the scene, officers held back the curious, some of whom were seen earlier posing with family members in front of the wreckage before being advised they were trespassing on railroad property and therefore subject to arrest if they did not leave.

Within a half-hour, the scene was fully covered by Scottsburg firemen and other personnel and, for the most part, closed off to the public.

By 12:30 p.m. or so, L&I, using a double diesel locomotive with a crew which had been patiently waiting south of the Lovers Lane crossing, pulled the remaining rail cars south. All crossings were re-opened.

That action alleviated the city's traffic problems, but, still, there was a monumental mess to be confronted.

Train officials called R.J. Corman Rail Road Group of Louisville to clean up the derailment. Initially, a plan was floated that east and west walls of the south section of the corn factory would be demolished. A crane and other equipment would then have a direct path to address the railcars, which looked like they'd been tossed about by a careless giant child. That plan was discarded, however, since there was enough room to the south of the old factory between its walls and the elevated track to position the crane.

First, several railcars had to be righted. All had to be unloaded, with the damaged vehicles, regardless of the amount of damage, being taken back to Louisville.

Some of this work was accomplished overnight. Salvage crews used high-powered lights to illuminate the scene almost as brightly as daylight.

On Sunday, May 18, Rick Julian of Julian's Wrecker Service said his staff moved 27 vehicles from the scene. About a third of them "...had no marks on them. About 2/3rds were damaged," he advised. The job by Julian's was completed in eight hours using rollbacks and flatbeds. Remaining vehicles stayed in the railcars, which was then pulled back south.

Three of the damaged railcars may also be going south, probably to Georgia, where they could be repaired. Two had been taken from the scene with the rest of the train by Sunday, but the three most damaged remained on the grounds Monday, May 19, around the corn factory. Beaten and with some areas bent, the railcars still looked in remarkably good shape

considering what they had been through. It was possible that a salvage crew would be tearing them apart there and then carting the steel away, but definite plans were not announced by Monday.

As of Sunday, city police were maintaining a 24-hour vigil at the site, which will continue until all railcars and other materiel were transported. The officers' presence was needed since people kept showing up at the corn factory, if not by car, then by foot.

One young couple, a teenage boy and girl, was chased and caught by an officer with the train law enforcement arm of L&I on Sunday. The officer said he noticed the couple further north on the train tracks as the locomotives were being readied for the trip back south. "They laid down on the tracks," he stated. When he caught them, the officer ordered them off train property. "I told them in no uncertain terms to go home and stay there," he said. The train tracks are private property, he explained, and anyone walking on them or within the line's boundaries can be arrested for trespassing.

Any overtime accumulated by city officers is being paid by the railroad firm. Additionally, the company is cleaning up the site around the corn factory, including a churned-up field to its south, where heavy equipment created deep ridges and ruts and nearly destroyed what was a graveled road that led down to the corn factory. At least one property owner in the area was also being reimbursed, according to one story. A vehicle had made ruts in the family's yard. A settlement was offered to the family for repairs and inconvenience.

"We are very thankful that this derailment did not happen in the middle of Scottsburg, very thankful indeed. The company has been very good to work with. Couldn't ask for better," stated Mayor Graham.

City Council President Terry Amick also made the trip to the site to see for himself the tossed railcars and damage. "Not much you can do about this. It's amazing no one was hurt," he commented.

Councilman Bill Hoagland was also pleased with the recovery effort. "The whole situation was handled well by the company and by our firemen and police and other law enforcement agencies. We're happy everything was accomplished safely and thank folks for their patience on Saturday as the derailment was being handled."

The derailment made Louisville and national news on Saturday, it was noted, as television crews trekked up Interstate 65 from Louisville to film at the site.