Museum News: Sabotage!

by CW (Bill) Smith, Curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

One hardly thinks of Sanderson and Terrell County as a hotbed of political unrest and terrorism, but in the early days, it was that, and more.

The well known criminal element in Sanderson has been chronicled. Murders, prostitution, gambling, crooked livestock deals, rustling, felonious assault, mayhem and mischief seems to be the order of the day, from 1883 until our county's founding in 1905.

And even then, it took several years, the institution of Prohibition and the closing of our six saloons to bring the rowdy town into submission.

Today, we are so safe that many people leave their homes unlocked and the keys in their car ignitions. But it wasn't so safe in the early days.

When men were transferred here on the railroad, they thought long and hard about bringing their families along. Un-chaperoned women could not walk the streets.

Even travel on the railroad was not all that safe. The incidence of robbery, de-railings and horrific passenger train accidents was quite high, as witnessed by the great, fiery train wreck at Mast Curve near Maxon siding west of here in 1902. That train and many of its passengers were burnt to a crisp. The ill-fated Engineer Mast was at the throttle that night, his name forever christening that particular curve on the railroad.

What is not generally understood by modern minds is that quite a few "accidents" were, in fact, acts of sabotage. The terms "train wreckers" and "fiends" flourished in the headlines and stories of period newspapers.

The word "sabotage" finds its roots in the French word *sabot*, a hand-carved wooden shoe similar to the *klompen* worn by Dutch farm and canal workers. Sabot were worn by French factory workers at the beginning of the industrial age, and were often thrown into the machinery by anarchists to shut down a factory.

Some of the acts of sabotage were for monetary gain. But many had no purpose but to cause death and destruction, much like the purveyors of modern computer viruses who create their diabolical codes just to cause mischief.

In the case of train derailments, spikes were loosened or removed, switches opened to send the unaware crashing onto trains awaiting in the sidings, rails pried apart and all manner of debris and boulders rolled down onto the tracks.

At Baxter's Curve, site of the famous 1912 train robbery eight miles east of Sanderson, a passenger train was thrown into the 60-foot ditch in 1905 by someone tampering with the tracks and removing the "fishplates," metal devices on which the rails were bedded on the crossties. Engineer Charles Thompson was crushed to death as he rode his engine to his fate. His fireman, John Taylor, was horribly and painfully scalded by escaping steam and boiling water. He crawled from the wreckage, but died a few agonizing hours later.

Fortunately, the train was not traveling fast and only the engine, tender, baggage and one passenger car were derailed, but it could have been much worse.

Indeed, Baxter's Curve itself was named for an engineer in an earlier, similar incident, who lost his life due to sabotage.

In an effort to protect life and property, the railroad hired "trackwalkers" to walk up and down the tracks to remove obstacles and look for sabotaged rails. With so many narrow cuts made for the tracks to pass through, a constant effort was needed to keep the rails clear.

Not all of the sabotage occurred outside the city limits, though. A derailment in the Sanderson rail yards occurred one night after switch locks were jimmied at three separate times and a passing train was redirected at full throttle to a siding, crashing into parked rail cars. But, only the most brazen train wreckers attempted their deeds with so many potential witnesses around.

During the Mexican revolution in the 1910s, Texas Rangers were stationed at major railroad bridges along the Southern Pacific/GH&SA to ward off saboteurs. In Terrell County alone, there were over 50 bridges that needed protection. A serious man-power problem arose...there were not enough Rangers to patrol all the bridges.

During World Wars I and II, the U. S. Army stationed troops to protect the bridges. The first incidence of saloon closings by the precursor to the Prohibition Act, was due to a law that forbid any establishment selling alcohol within ten miles of a military installation. Baxter Curve is just eight miles from Sanderson and the military demanded that its soldiers be protected from unbridled saloonkeepers by enforcing the new law. Sanderson saloons immediately closed, but a few months later, when the army was called elsewhere, reopened within the hour of the troop's departure.

There are no recorded acts of sabotage of trains and bridges from the World War period, but with the increase of worldwide terrorism, new attention is being directed at possible terrorist and saboteur threats.

An incidence of sabotage occurred in 1995 at Palo Verde, Arizona, when an Amtrak train was derailed on a bridge by a local supremacist group, the so-called "Sons of the Gestapo." One person died and 78 were injured. Physical evidence and a "manifesto" were found, but FBI think the evidence was planted to mask a failed attempt to hijack a freight train.

As French critic, novelist and journalist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr is reported to have said, the more things change, the more they stay the same. In a world bent on reverting to our primitive past, we can probably continue to count on cowardly sabotage as being one of the weapons of choice in the arsenal of the modern terrorist/anarchist.

Baxter's Curve, showing the precipitous drop-off that caused such destruction in wrecks.
Photo courtesy of TCMM.

A spectacular derailment in the Sanderson yards in 1902 might have been caused by sabotage.
Photo courtesy of TCMM.