

Museum News: The Train Wreck of 1902

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

The Terrell County history book is filled with personal accounts of family and history, and a fair amount of folktales that have been recited so often that they are taken as truth.

Master storyteller W. J. Banner relates the horrific story of a drunken engineer in 1905 sending his train load of Chinese detainees to a fiery death near Maxon, 25 miles west of Sanderson. When one tries to

ascertain the truth, his account is hard to document. In fact, it is impossible to find that story in the media of the times.

Instead, there is an even more horrific account of the only fiery train wreck in that period, which occurred in the same spot, but three years earlier. And in the true account there was not even one Chinese involved.

Early day Sanderson had no roads to speak of, but travel east and west was easy since the railroad was available. In fact, it was the lifeline for Sanderson. Almost all goods and services were brought in by rail and travel was a luxury, even for the lowliest ticket-holder.

With two trains east and two trains west every day, you could go and come in one day if necessary. And if you worked for the railroad or were a county official, you traveled for free!

Train #9 was typical for 1902 travelers. It consisted of a baggage car, an express car (like a UPS truck on the train) a coach and a chair car. In that day the railroad would promote tourism and, much like travel agencies of today would book whole cars to people in a community for group tours. On this train there were tourist cars from St. Louis, Cincinnati and Washington, D.C.

Also on the train was a Standard Pullman car with private rooms and sleeping berths. To complete the train there was a private business or observation car on the rear, the *Pere Marquette*, owned by Mr. Thomas Ryan, an influential Wall Street capitalist and first vice president of the noted Morton Trust Company, who was traveling with family and friends to San Francisco.

In Willie Banner's account the engineer roared into Sanderson, late and drunk, and slammed on the brakes. Reprimanded by the conductor, he roared away, even more angry. Banner says the train was going at top speed when it reached Maxon Curve.

In actuality, the train was late but there was no evidence the engineer or the fireman were under the influence. By the position of the wreckage, it was estimated the train was traveling at about forty-five miles per hour when it left the tracks, hardly top speed for those engines, which could easily race along at 100 miles per hour.

At 3:30 a.m. on March 7, 1902, Sunset Limited Train #9 approached Maxon, twenty-five miles west of Sanderson, coming down a long incline and entering a hairpin curve. At that point the engine, tender and first six cars of sleeping passengers hurtled from the tracks and piled into unbelievable mass of twisted metal and splintered timbers. The tourist cars and the Pullman derailed but remained upright and on the roadbed. The *Pere Marquette* remained on the rails and was unscathed. The cause of the wreck was undetermined, but it was thought at first to be due to rail spreading or a broken rail.

A catastrophic wreck at Baxter's Curve a few years earlier (but with few casualties) was due to sabotage of the rails, but there was no evidence of that at Mast Curve, which was named for the engineer who was killed in the 1902 wreck.

Before anyone knew what was happening, a gas tank on one of the cars exploded and in seconds the whole scene was engulfed in flames. Cars of the time used gas-lighting for illumination, but they were time bombs, waiting to go off in an accident.

The clerks in the baggage and express cars escaped the flames but were severely burned or scalded by the escaping steam.



The greatest carnage was in the forward coaches. Sleeping passengers were either killed outright or trapped in the flaming wreckage. Despite the heroic efforts of the uninjured passengers, many of the injured in the first two cars were doomed to a fiery death.

Accounts say the survivors of the wrecked coaches and the upright cars raced about in a panic, some with tatters of burned clothing hanging from their bodies, trying to save the injured. When the upright cars also began to smolder and ignite, passengers ran to the *Pere Marquette* and pushed it away from the roaring inferno.

Capitalist Ryan and his associates were safe, but a first report said that they had perished in the flames. This actually caused the stock market to dip, until the truth was known.

The death toll from the grisly accident was never determined accurately, but the official toll stood at twelve dead and about seventy-five injured. All but the bodies of the engineer and fireman were consumed by the flames. Survivors claimed the death toll was much higher, but the railroad never acknowledged a higher toll.

Tabloid-like details of the papers of the day listed each injured person and the gruesome state of their injuries. Apparently political correctness (and common decency) had not yet infected the media. Many were burned or scalded by escaping steam, and others suffered crushing injuries, dismemberment and broken bones. The accounts of the demise of small children and infants was especially heart-rending, one lady completely forgetting her toddler to save her older child in the back of the car!

Mr. Ryan reported to SP President E. H. Harriman that he didn't believe the accident was due to excessive speed. He examined the wreckage and felt that the engine had failed in some way, but the devastation was so great he couldn't actually determine the cause.

To add a final tragedy to a terrible story, the track foreman at Maxon hopped on his hand car and sped off to the scene of the wreck. Along the way he accidentally fell to his death on the rocks along the track.

A few weeks after the accident the railroad settled up with the survivors, paying out the then-huge sum of \$73,000. Papers of the time marveled at the speed with which the GH&SA railroad dealt with the claims. Corporate America, then as now, often drug their feet in paying claims for damages to their customers, but this high-profile case demanded immediate action. One local claimed his mother wouldn't ride the train after the accident, a common fear, so the railroad had to dispel that notion to maintain ridership.

It is interesting to see how local folktales differ from the actual truth. Willie Banner was a baby in 1902 and based his story on what he heard from others. Eventually, the tale became so twisted and exaggerated that it hardly resembled the true account. The art of storytelling is just that...a blend of truth and just enough embellishment to keep your listeners coming back for more. But to know the real story you have to dig in and do your detective work.