



Museum News

ENGINEER MURDERED, HIS TRAIN RUNS WILD

The Sanderson community has lost many good men to accidents on the railroad, most recently the four railroad men who lost their lives in the 1994 head-on collision of two freight trains west of town. But the history of the community is rife with incidents of those who were severely injured or lost their lives in this very dangerous profession.

On July 8, 1921, the town was stunned to learn that prominent railroad engineer and entrepreneur William Francis Bohlman had lost his life when his engine exploded at Paisano Pass in western Brewster County, just a scant one hundred miles from home. The community not only lost a railroad man and family man, but an ardent supporter of business in Terrell County and the architect and builder of the elegant Bohlman Building, built just three years before.

Bohlman and his wife Mary Burns Bohlman and baby Mary Ellen transferred to Sanderson in 1909 where he took a position as engineer on the Southern Pacific Lines. His run was from Sanderson to the next division point, Valentine, Texas, and he drove a freight locomotive, a "Mikado"-style 2-8-2 (2 smaller lead wheels, 8 large driving wheels, 2 small trailing wheels) especially suited to the mountainous terrain of this division.

The Bohlmans were public spirited and devoted promot-

ers of business in Sanderson. They ran a confectionary (candy shop/soda fountain) and motion picture next to the Farley General Store at Oak and Persimmon. Bohlman was a charter member of the first Terrell County Chamber of Commerce in 1920. While in Sanderson they had three more children, all boys, but, sadly, two passed away in early childhood.

In 1917 the Bohlman's business, along with Farley's Store and several other businesses were wiped out by a spectacular fire. The Bohlmans purchased the corner property and built the imposing Bohlman Building, in which they ran their new confectionary and picture show downstairs and the St. Francis Hotel upstairs. In those days they would push the seats back in the theatre and have public dances in that space, so the building was a popular gathering place for the citizens of the community.

Life was idyllic in Sanderson and they could have lived there in ease the rest of their lives, but fate intervened.

On July 8, 1921, Bohlman and his fire-



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

W.F. and Mary Bohlman

man, Charles F. Robinson, were on their regular run to Valentine. When they reached Paisano Pass, the highest point on the SP New Orleans-Los Angeles route at 5,074.1 feet elevation, the engines of that day (and today!) labored to make the summit.

At about 5:00 A.M. on that day, Engineer Bohlman pulled his engine #745 to a stop just past the summit. The records are not clear about what happened next but the engine exploded with such force that each of the driving wheels indented the rail where they stood, sending the boiler and cab high into the air, clear of the engine chassis but not derailing any wheel or car. The tender and the rest of the train were left unscathed. The boiler and cab landed clear of the roadbed and Bohlman's body was found some 60 feet from the wreckage. Apparently he stayed with the engine to try to bring the situation under control while Robinson, who was found three miles to the east wandering in a state of confusion, jumped for his life. The wrecked engine was loaded onto flatcars and hauled to the engine shop in El Paso where it was rebuilt and returned to service. Maintenance crews erected a cross on the spot where Bohlman's body was found, and it was clearly visible from the highway for many years.

In spite of the tragedy, and loving her life in Sanderson, Mrs. Bohlman and her two small children remained, where the children finished high school and went off to college. In 1941 Mrs. Bohlman sold her business interests and moved to be closer to her children. Injured in an auto accident in the early '50s, she never fully recovered and passed away in 1958.

W.F. and Mary Bohlman exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit that built Sanderson. They believed in the future of Sanderson and were willing to put down roots here and help the town grow. In spite of the greatest of tragedies in losing her children and spouse, Mary Bohlman was willing to stay and make a life here. Such was the spirit of many of our early day

residents, and of many today who want to make Sanderson a viable environment for home and business.

After this initial account was published to the Terrell County museum web site (terrellmuseum.info), the author happened to meet the late Mrs. Margaret Farley, an important and influential citizen of Sanderson and a walking history book about all things Terrell County. In telling her about the just-published page about the Bohlmans, she closed the conversation by shading her mouth with her hand and uttering in a rasping whisper, "They say he was murdered!" The author realized that as with so many things about Sanderson and Terrell history, there was more to the story than just what was in the Terrell County history book.

Deciding to see what early-day newspapers had to say about the tragedy at Paisano Pass, the author went to an internet archive of state and national newspapers and the first headline that came up was, "**Engineer Murdered, His Train Runs Wild**" (New York Tribune, July 9, 1921.) Thus began an eye-opening journey of shocking revelations and unbelievable twists in the seemingly straightforward story of Engineer William Bohlman and his untimely demise.

According to the newspapers, when investigators recovered Bohlman's body there



Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

appeared to be a bullet hole in the head. That, coupled with the fact that the fireman Charles Robinson apparently was clubbed over the head and shoved out of the locomotive cab some four miles before the engine finally exploded, led authorities to suspect foul play. Robinson had suffered a severe concussion from the blow and was wandering in a state of confusion when found.

Then, when head brakeman Earl Stirman, another Sanderson citizen and respected businessman, was questioned he told a strange tale. Riding in the caboose that day, he noticed that as the train neared Paisano Pass it began to go slower and slower, much more than normal. He began to move forward to see what the problem was, and as he neared the cab, he saw a man dressed in black jump from the engine and run away. In the next moment the engine exploded, before he was able to come to Bohlman's aid.

To add to the confusion, authorities had trouble determining whether the incident took place in Brewster County or Presidio County, since it occurred near the county line. Neither county could take jurisdiction over the matter until that was settled. Hearings actually took place in both counties.

Finally, Presidio County took the lead and Charles Robinson, the fireman, was arrested on suspicion of murder, he being the last person to see Bohlman alive. But, the facts simply did not support the case against Robinson. He was severely assaulted, and in fact, had sustained a huge contusion to his brain. In the ensuing days his behavior became erratic and about ten days after the incident he committed suicide with his pistol. But his autopsy revealed the contusion and it was theorized that the pressure had driven him insane. Wild tales arose in Sanderson that Bohlman was having an affair with Robinson's wife, but people who knew them intimately rejected the gossip.

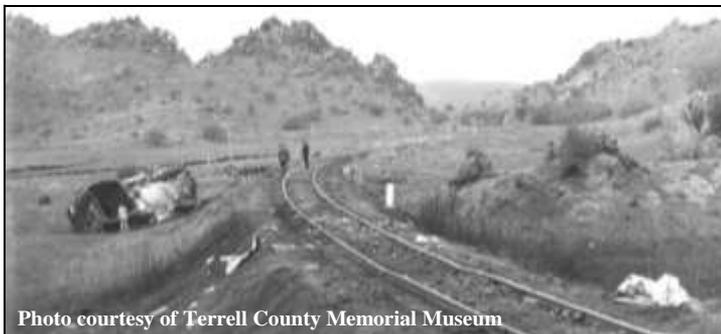


Photo courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

Next, the authorities went after Earl Stirman. After an exhaustive search by lawmen and area ranchers, no trace of the "man in black" could be found, which made



Stirman's story suspicious. But again, Stirman was a civic leader, as was Bohlman, and it was not in his

character to commit so heinous a deed. (He operated a dairy in Sanderson and was the undertaker at that time, as well as working on the railroad.) Besides, there was no motive for either Robinson or Stirman to commit the murder, and indeed, they were both close friends of the Bohlman's. Mrs. Bohlman stood behind the men and urged the authorities to look elsewhere.

After another hearing Stirman was released from jail for lack of evidence. Then, to further cloud the story, the undertaker who prepared

Bohlman's body told a reporter that the wound to his head did not look like a bullet hole, but

more likely a shrapnel wound from the explosion. The backhead of a steam locomotive (above) is laced with bolts and such a powerful explosion could have sent a bolt into Bohlman's skull, producing a bullet-like wound.

At this point, the story, which had made headlines across the country in large papers and small, died away.



About two years later a series of news items in the Sanderson Times related that Mrs. Bohlman had sued the GH&SA Railway Company for \$50,000 for the death of her husband. The first trial resulted in a mistrial and the second, about six months later, resulted in a hung jury, "favoring the plaintiff," whatever that means. There ends the story, as related in the newspapers of the day.

Was William Bohlman murdered in his locomotive? Was Charles Robinson assaulted with a heavy object and thrown to the trackside? Did Earl Stirman actually see a mysterious man in black, leaping from the engine and running away? We will probably never know the truth. But as with many other stories from Terrell County's history, thorough detective work often turns up a sinister scenario to simple events.

Railroading was and is a dangerous profession, and the history of Sanderson is washed in the blood of good and bad alike. William Bohlman's death was a tragic loss to his family and to the citizens of Terrell County and Sanderson. With the Bohlman's entrepreneurial spirit they might have accomplished much more, to the benefit of the community. But it was not to be. It is to Mrs. Bohlman's credit, however, that she chose to stay and raise her children here, in the face of a terrible, life-changing tragedy.

References

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All articles retrieved from <http://texashistory.unt.edu/>