

Terrell County Memorial November, 2014 Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Train wrecker!



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

Take yourself back to 1883. It is one of those rare February mornings in the fields between McGregor and Moody, Texas, southwest of Waco, when the sun has warmed the earth and a hint of spring is in the air.

The morning express passenger train is flying down the Santa Fe tracks at the magnificent clip of 35 miles-per-hour. In the chair car a few passengers are visiting, some catching a nap, but one young lady is decked out in her traveling clothes, passing the time with knitting.

As she turns away from the window to reach in her bag for another skein of yarn a terrific crash shatters the peace and the window next to her erupts into a shower

of shards, spraying her face and hands with splinters of glass. Someone has hefted a five-pound rock through the window, hard enough for it to pass to the other side of the car and burst through the opposite window.

The conductor, who has been punching tickets and checking for stowaways, pulls the emergency cord and the train comes to a grinding halt.

Other passengers become animated and excitedly call out, "There he is, there's the one who threw it!" Sure enough, a small figure is seen darting through the fields, running for his life.

One passenger bursts from the train, incensed at the temerity of such a train



Photo: TCMM.

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

wrecker. He finds a horse grazing in the field and deftly swings to its back and pursues the fiend at full gallop. The scurrying figure is no match for the horse and its rider and is soon brought to bay.

Passengers and train crewmen are startled to find, not a brash anarchist or be-masked bandit, but just a big, overgrown kid, no more than thirteen or fourteen years old.

As they prepare to haul him off to the nearest sheriff, a haggard farmer races up to the train and begs the crowd to release the boy.

"Let him go," he says, "and I'll make sure he don't do this again." A fire in the man's eyes told them he meant what he said.

So, they turn the boy over to the irate man with his earnest assurances that the boy would be punished properly. Before they can even get back on the train, the angry man begins to pummel the boy and slap him about the head and neck with his open palm.

As the train begins to pull away, the

passengers and crew have second thoughts about leaving the boy to the man's wrath, for now, he is beating him with a sapling which he has uprooted by the tracks, apparently intending to whip him within an inch of his life.

Train wrecking, though, was a serious threat in those days and people took it very seriously. For whatever reason the act was committed...larceny, revenge, terrorism, anarchy...the penalty often was death for causing serious injury or death to people or damage to property.

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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 criminal element in Sanderson was well known and has been chronicled. Murders, prostitution, gambling, crooked livestock deals, rustling, felonious assault, gunrunning, 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,

Two Attempts at Train Wrecking

The HERALD learns from good authority that there have been two attempts to wreck the G. H. and S. A. passenger train near Sanderson within the past week. The first attempt was made at what is known as Baxter's Curve: as the train from the east came around the curve the engineer noticed some ties piled on the track and stopped the train just before he would have struck them.

The matter was reported to head quarters, but on Saturday night another attempt was made about four miles from Sanderson, and within a few hundred yards of the one the night before. This time a large pile of stones were placed on the track, and had the train been running at its regular speed there would have been a terrible accident. But as it was the engineer slowed up for the curve and was still going rather slow when he noticed only a short distance ahead a pile of something on the track and he at once reversed his engine and threw on the air.

Robbery is the only cause that the officials can think of that would cause anyone to try to wreck the train, and Detective P. J. Long, of the Southern Pacific and Sheriff Almond, of Val Verde county, are not after the would be robbers with a posse. It is thought to be a well organized gang who have been working in this part of the country for several years.

along with 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. Unchaperoned women could not walk the streets.

Even travel on the railroad was not all that safe. The incidence of robbery, derailings 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 incinerated. The ill-fated Engineer Mast was at the throttle that night, his name forever linked with 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. Sabots 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 other than 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 into trains awaiting in the sidings, rails pried apart and all manner of debris and boulders rolled down onto the tracks.

Article from the Pullman (WA) Herald describing one of many sabotage attempts on the GH&SA, dated 6-8-1907.

BRIDGE BURNS; RAILROAD IS TIED UP

Structure Near Langtry Is
Consumed by Flames of a
Mysterious Origin.

7-13-1910

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 brackets on which the rails were bedded on the crossties. Engineer Charles Thompson was crushed to death as he rode the 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.

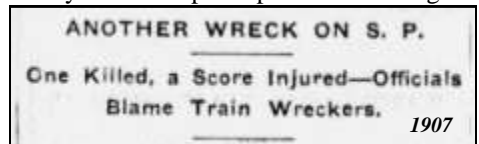
In an effort to protect life and property the railroad hired "trackwalkers" to patrol the tracks to remove obstacles and look for sabotaged rails. With so many narrow cuts made for the tracks to pass through, a constant effort was needed to keep the rails clear.

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 jimmed 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.

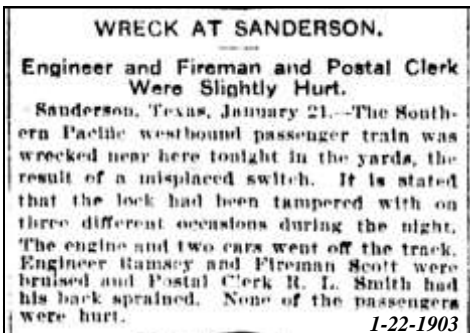
During World Wars I and II, the U. S. Army used troops to protect the bridges.



There were no reported acts of sabotage of West Texas trains and bridges from the World War periods.

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.



References

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- "Train Wrecker Caught," (Ft. Worth) *Daily Democrat* February 12, 1883
- "Two attempts at train wrecking," *El Paso Daily Herald* 8-30-1900
- "Another wreck on S. P.," *El Paso Daily Herald* 8-30-1907
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995_Palo_Verde,_Arizona_derailment
- Newspapers retrieved from "The Portal to Texas History," <http://texashistory.unt.edu/>

All newsletters can be found at <http://terrellmuseum.info/newsletters/>