

Los Angeles, CA Train Derailment, Jan 1956

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ALL-OUT PROBE OF L.A. WRECK ORDERED; 29 DIE

Impounded Speed Tape of Diesel Reported to Show 71 m. p. h. on 'Slow' Curve

Los Angeles, Jan. 23 -- (AP) -- At least 29 persons lay dead and 150 injured today as officials pushed for an all-out investigation of the grinding overturn of a two-car Santa Fe diesel train last night.

(Police impounded the speed tape of the ill-fated commuter train, the United Press reported. Train officials were heard to say that the tape, which keeps a continuous record of the train's speed, registered 71 miles an hour at the 10-degree curve where a 35 m.p.h. limit is imposed.)

Most of the injured were hurt only slightly.

Search Morgues

As relatives searched morgues and hospitals for their loved ones, the question being asked by authorities was:

Did a "blackout" cause 61-year-old Engineer FRANK PARRISH to take a curve at excessive speed?

Santa Fe officials indicated they will respond immediately to Mayor NORRIS POULSON'S demand for a full investigation into the worst rail disaster in California in nearly 50 years. A spokesman for the California Public Utilities Commission, senior accident investigator C. E. MILNE, said he will sit on the railroad's hearing which would be the first step in the investigative procedure. He said the Interstate Commerce Commission also probably would send an agent.

15 M.P.H. Safe Speed

MILNE, who spent five hours at the wreck scene within the Los Angeles train yard limits, said: "The train certainly appeared to be going faster than the speed limit."

He said, the safe speed is 15 miles an hour in the area, although PARRISH contends he passed a 35 m.p.h. marker before apparently blacking out.

The possibility of charges against the engineer would depend on action by police and the district attorney.

Bodies were so badly mangled and dismembered -- some were decapitated -- that 14 hours after the wreck the coroner's office had identified only 16 dead. At least two were children. The highest rail death toll in this state was 32 in 1907.

The train last night was en route to San Diego with approximately 180 persons aboard, about 40 per cent of them service men returning to their bases. It was impossible to determine the exact number aboard, as no tickets are required for children five and under and there were a number of these on the train.

The two cars overturned on their left sides a few minutes after leaving the station at 5:30 p.m. It was dark.

"The people sitting on the left side were sucked right out of the window and caught on the ties when the train crashed on its side," said Flagman BILL HINES, one of the crew of five. "Those people didn't have a chance."

Sparks showered as both overturned cars skidded along with a deathly screeching sound for about 200 feet on the outside of the curve. Each car contained a diesel unit and room for 88 passengers. The accident happened inside the city limits, about four miles from Union Depot.

Autos Delay Rescue

Thousands of homebound motorists, hearing of the wreck on their car radios, drove to the scene, causing an immense traffic jam and delaying some ambulances.

Stunned, injured survivors lay, sat or stood along the ground. Some searched for missing relatives. Many of the badly injured screamed in pain and panic.

Santa Fe President FRED G. GURLEY said in Chicago:

"All indications are the accident was caused by undue speed."

RAYMOND D. SHELTON, general manager for Santa Fe's coast lines, said, "Engineer FRANK PARRISH estimated his speed at the time of the derailment at 50 m.p.h. I think this curve would take about 40 m.p.h."

Blacked Out

PARRISH, 61, of San Bernardino, who has been with the railroad 37 years, said he had slowed the train after passing a 35 m.p.h. marker and apparently blacked out. The next thing he remembered, the engineer said, was the train beginning to tip over.

Fireman HOMER SMITH was riding with engineer PARRISH, a second man in the cab being customary on Diesel engines. He told a newsman he wasn't aware of anything wrong with the engineer.

MILNE said the PUC had not yet taken any formal statement from SMITH or the engineer.

MILNE said the so-called "dead man's" control on the engine, designed to stop a train if

something happens to the engineer, is activated by removal of the engineer's foot from a pedal.

It is possible, he said, that the engineer could have slumped over but with his foot remaining on the "dead man's" control pedal.

Many bodies were crushed and dismembered. Emergency calls went out for doctors, nurses, clergy and blood. Scores of ambulances lined up at the scene. Clergymen of all faiths circulated among the dead and injured, administering final rites or giving comfort.

The first ambulance attendant to reach the scene, DANIEL J. CESAROTTI, said:

"We gave them morphine until we didn't have any more -- and still there were people screaming out in pain. It was like a nightmare."

"There were screams and moans all about us. It was horrible."

"Bodies and parts of bodies were everywhere. Many of the passengers had been crushed in their seats."

"Others had been thrown through the windows of the railroad cars and crushed under them."

"We saw the bodies of two children."

"This is the worst we've ever seen."

SURVIVORS TELL HORROR OF PILEUP

Los Angeles, Jan. 23 -- (AP) -- A woman trying to escape, stuck in a window, passengers pushing, trampling men, women and children spilled together in a pile, screaming, as the coaches tipped over.

These were some of the tales of terror told by survivors of last night's wreck of a San Diego bound two-car Santa Fe diesel train.

"The train seemed to slew sideways and topple," said FLOYD C. BALLARD of San Diego, who suffered shock and a back injury.

"I tried to get to a window. I remember there was a woman stuck half-way through. I was trampled and pushed, but I managed to get up on my feet. I don't know how I got out -- but then there I was, outside the train."

"People were screaming and sobbing ..."

ANDREW DURHAM, 33, Seattle, a Navy chief electrician's mate, said he thought the train was going too fast.

"The baggage started coming out of the rack," he related. "I grabbed for the luggage rack and held on."

"We went over."

"There were half a dozen sailors in our compartment. We started helping the people into the vestibule. One of the sailors put a tourniquet on a man's leg .. I never saw anything like this."

DURHAM is a veteran of 15 years in the Navy.

The REV. FATHER FIDELIS KUBAN of St. Turibius Church nearby, one of the first to reach the wreckage, entered a car by climbing to the upturned side and dropping through a doorway.

The REV. FATHER OLIVER A. LYNCH of St. Joseph's Catholic Church crawled along with doctors through the wreckage to administer extreme unction.

Lobbies of several hospitals were thronged with anxious people throughout the night.

WRECK VICTIMS ARE IDENTIFIED

Los Angeles, Jan. 23 -- (AP) -- The coroner's office identified the following as killed in the Santa Fe train wreck:

SGT. JOHN E. WILLIAMS, 55, USMC, Camp Pendleton.

PATRICK H. O'NEIL, USN, Gardena.

STANLEY LEVITT, San Diego.

JOHN HENRY BREEN, El Monte.

MRS. DOROTHY LESTER, 36, San Diego.

ALBERT WARREN _____, 50, Lakeside, Calif.

KENNETH L. WALLACE, San Diego.

SAM SIRATON, San Diego.

MRS. MARJORIE AHMAN, 26, Sioux Falls, S. D., (MRS. AHMAN was four months pregnant.)

WILLIAM KOGAN, San Diego.

G. G. HARVEY, aged 18 or 19, U. S. Navy.

ELEANOR HOPKINS, 65, Pacific Beach, Calif.

LT. DONALD B. LUND, of the USS Rochester, temporarily stationed at San Diego Naval Base.

MRS. MAY GOLDBERG, Garden Grove, Calif.

MRS. ANNETTE FRAZIER, 17, Houston, Tex., en route to San Diego to join husband, Marine Sgt. Raymond D. Frazier.

MRS. THELMA BUZZELLE, San Diego.

EVA LIPTON, believed to be of San Diego.

MARCELLE C. MEYER, Garden Grove, Calif.

THOMAS FERGUSON, 32, La Mesa, Calif.

LILA FERGUSON, 30, his wife.

MRS. ANDREW FOSTER, 25, and CHARLES FOSTER, JR., 23 months, San Diego.

_____, S. D. (Note: Name is Unreadable)

WILSON A. LAROWE, 38, San Diego, sailor.

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