The Wreck of Second No. 5
May 7, 1951
by Ron Dawson

In May of 1951, the Korean War was in full swing, General Macarthur having been relieved of his command and replaced by General Ridgeway. The outcome of the war was still very much undecided after the intervention of the Communist Chinese forces in late 1950. Against this background, many young people were being inducted into the services and WWII vets were often recalled to active duty. The Air Force basic training was at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, which was home to numerous military installations.

On May 7, 1951, both Air Force and Army personnel were being moved from San Antonio to the West Coast by train on the Texas & New Orleans, a Southern Pacific Railroad Texas subsidiary. As was often the case, special movements ran as second sections to regularly scheduled passenger runs and this was no exception, running as a second section of westbound No.5, the *Argonaut.* In 1950, Southern Pacific had introduced the handsome new Budd-equipped streamliner, the *Sunset Limited,*, Nos. 1 and 2, on the New Orleans-Los Angeles route, The Argonaut was the secondary train on the route and in 1951, was still steam powered and equipped with standard heavyweight consists.

The second No. 5 was powered by T&NO No. 703[1], a 1930 Baldwin product, Class GS-1, with a 4-8-4 wheel arrangement. The consist of the train was, in order, one coach, two Pullmans, a diner, three Pullmans, and a caboose. Not normally seen on passenger runs, the caboose was often used on a troop movement for convenience of the crew and an additional safety measure.

The crew consisted of the engineer, R.B. Elliot with 35 years railroading experience, fireman Jack R. Jorstad, front brakeman Troy Tiner, and rear brakeman J.R. Luton, Jr. , The conductor, Bob Coleman, was riding in the fifth car and was not injured.
The train carried three cars of Air Force men from Lackland and two cars of Army men from Fort Sam Houston. The Air Force had become a separate service in 1947 as opposed to the Army Air Forces of the WWII era.

The accident report[2] gave this description: "This train departed from Valentine at 2:42 pm, 32 minutes late, departed from Small, the last open office, 86.2 miles west of Valentine, at 4:29 pm, 19 minutes late, passed the speed-limit sign, passed signal 7603, which indicated Proceed, and while moving on a 10 degree, 26 minute curve to the right, the engine, tender, the first five cars, and the left front wheels of the sixth car were derailed.

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[1] A Century of SP Steam Locomotives-Guy L. Dunscomb
4-8-4's Daylight The Complete Story of the Southern Pacific GS Class Series 4400 Locomotives by Robert J. Church

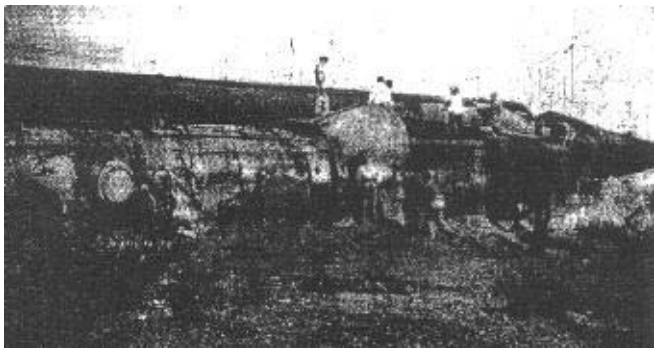
[2] Interstate Commerce Commission, Report No. 3402, July 12, 1951.

The engine and the tender remained coupled and stopped on their left sides. With the front end of the engine 430 feet west of the point of the derailment and 40 feet south of the center-line of the track. The cab was torn from the boiler. The drawbar was broken but the safety bar was not damaged. Separations occurred between the tender and the first car and between the first and second cars. The first car stopped with the front end against the rear end of the tender and the rear end 8.5 feet south of the track. The front end of the car was crushed inward a distance of about 10 feet. The second car stopped across the track, with the front end 398 feet west of the point of derailment. The front end and the rear end of this car were, respectively, 8.5 north and 26.6 feet south of the center-line of the track. The car leaned slightly to the south. The other derailed cars stopped approximately upright and in line with the track. The engine, the tender, and the first three cars were badly damaged. The other derailed cars were somewhat damaged.

The front brakeman was killed. The engineer, the fireman, and the flagman, were injured."

From the El Paso Times morning edition, May 8th, "Troy Tiner, 1709 Montana Street, was killed and five other crew members were injured about 3:35pm El Paso time when the second section of the T&NO Railway's westbound NO. 5, the *Argonaut*, was wrecked 1.5 miles west of Finlay,[3] Texas, about 70 miles southwest of El Paso".

Tiner, the front brakeman, was killed when he was crushed between the tender and the first car. The T&NO GS-1 engines were reported to have received brakeman's doghouses on the tender, but it not known whether this was the case with the tender of No. 703.



Seriously injured was the fireman, Jack R. Jorstad. Jorstad received fractures of the left leg and was burned severely by live steam escaping from the boiler. Less seriously injured was R.B. Elliot, the engineer, who sustained burns from the escaping steam. In addition the rear brakeman and several of the dining car crew received injuries.

[3] Finlay, Texas was near the site of the old coaling station between Fort Hancock and Sierra Blanca. It was described in 1914 as a "rural post office on the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio". The last available population figures for Finlay date from the mid-forties when the town had about a 100 inhabitants. By the early 1970's, it was only a siding on the railroad. *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas Historical Association.

The engine left the tracks just as the train was entering the curve. Officials were quoted as saying that the curve is ten degrees and that the speed limit on the curve is 30 miles per hour. At the time of the wreck, it was believed the accident was caused by an overturned rail and the engineer and crew members related they believed that the train was within the 30 mph speed limit.

Timer's body was wedged in the wreckage and a crew of welders was necessary to cut around the wreckage to free his body. Jorstad, the fireman, was pinned in the locomotive by the sand box and the seat box, which fell on his leg. Shortly after the wreck, A.L. Slay, engineer of freight train 241 which was at Small, Texas, six miles east of the scene, arrived to help. Slay and four soldiers from the train labored to free Jorstad. PFC Donald Smith of Georgia, who worked to free Jorstad, stated that the escaping steam had turned the sand around the trapped man into a "mass of boiling mud". "I have never seen such courage as he (Jorstad) displayed while we were trying to free him", said Smith.

Slay and the soldiers worked in relays in the live steam and searing mud. "One of us would work for awhile to free Jack and then someone else would take over. Those soldiers were real soldiers in comforting Jack and the other injured", Slay said.

Travis Irby, a garage operator at McNary, was among the first to reach the scene. The injured engineer was placed in his car and taken to the junction of the old road and the new highway, where an ambulance was met. Sheriff's deputies were rushed to the scene to handle the large crowd that soon gathered to watch the operations. Practically the whole population of Hudspeth County was there standing on the edge of the cut.

Leroy H. Morris, of Houston, a porter, received head injuries when hit by a flying juicing machine in the diner kitchen. William Dennis, a cook, also of Houston, received head lacerations and an injured hip.

The rear flagman related that he was sitting in the cupola of the caboose when he saw the engine leave the track. He indicated he reached for a grab iron and missed and fell to the floor of the caboose.

Undoubtedly, further loss of life was averted by the fact that the soldier from the first two cars had gone back to the diner and the cars were empty. Work crews from Sierra Blanca, Fort Hancock, and El Paso rushed to the scene and immediately began laying new track and clearing wreckage. The Division Superintendent who was in El Paso at the time went to the scene and indicated he expected trains to be rolling by the following morning.

An injured crewman is helped away from the wreck.

The injured were transported by ambulance to El Paso hospitals and the soldiers were taken by Greyhound buses to Union Station in El Paso where they continued their journey to the West Coast.

When the ICC finished its investigation and released the accident report on July 12, 1951, their conclusion was that the "accident was caused by excessive speed on the curve"[4]

The engine was not equipped with a speed recording device; however, the report went on to say: "According to data furnished by the carrier, the center of gravity of engine 703 is 79 inches above the tops of the rails. The center of gravity of the tender with the estimated amount of fuel and water remaining at the time the accident occurred was calculated as 80.4 inched above the tops of the rails. The calculated equilibrium, safe and overturning speeds for engine 703, moving on a 10 degree, 26 minute curve having a superelevation of 5 inches are, respectively 27, 32.2, and 54.8 miles per hour. The calculated equilibrium, safe, and overturning speeds for the tender moving on the same curve are, respectively, 27, 31.9, and 54.4 miles per hour.

As second 5 was approaching the point where the accident occurred the speed was a bout 60 miles per hour. The enginemen were in the cab of the engine, the conductor was in the fifth car, the front brakeman was in the first car, and the flagman was in the caboose. Before the accident occurred the engine and the cars had been riding smoothly. The brakes of this train had been tested and had functioned properly when used en route. The engineer said that he made two brake pipe reductions and placed the throttle in drifting position immediately after the train passed Finlay. He said that he made a further brake-pipe reduction as the engine entered the curve on which the accident occurred. He thought that the train entered the curve at a speed of about 30 mile per hour. He said that the engine gradually overturned and that the wheels of the engine did not contact the ties. The fireman was so seriously injured that he could not be questioned at the time of the investigation. The conductor said he thought the speed of the train was about 30 mph when it entered the curve.

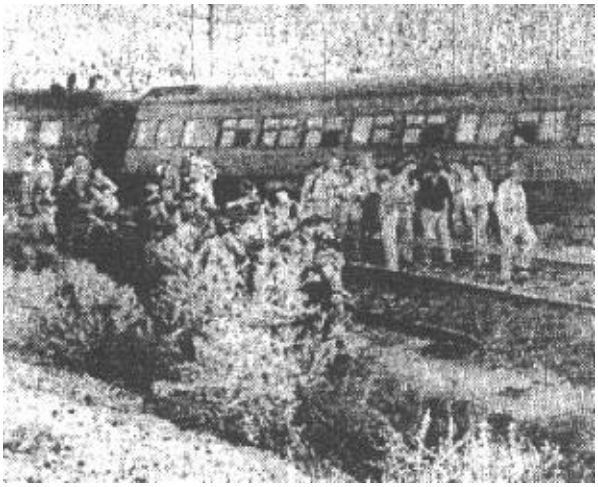
[4] ibid, ICC report No. 3402

The flagman said that when the train was about ¼ mile east of the point where the accident occurred the speed was 40 or 45 miles per hour and that it was about 30 mph when the train entered the curve.

Two U.S. Immigration inspectors were in the immediate vicinity said they observed Second 5 as it approached the point of the accident and each estimated that the speed was about 60 miles per hour.

Examination of engine 703 and the cars of Second 5 after the accident disclosed no condition which could have contributed to the cause of the derailment. The throttle of engine 703 was in drifting position, the reverse lever was in position for forward motion, the automatic brake valve was in release, and the independent brake valve was in the running position. The engine truck, driving truck, and trailer truck assemblies were in good condition. The flanges and the treads of all wheels of the engine were of good contour, and the tread wear was negligible. All wheel-centers were tight on their axles and all tires were tight on their wheel centers, parallel to their companion tires. The lateral motion in the driving wheels was within the limits prescribed by the carrier. The driving box shoes and wedges were in good condition and well lubricated. The spring buffer assembly between the engine and the tender was in good condition, and the chafing faces were well lubricated. There were several abrasions on the outside of the counterbalances of the left No. 2 and 3 driving wheels, and on the outside face of the left No. 4 driving wheel tire, where these wheels had been in contact with the south ends of the ties.

Examination of the track throughout a distance of 1 mile east of the point of derailment disclosed that the alignment, gauge, and surface were well maintained. There was no indication of dragging equipment or of an obstruction having been on the track.



The engineer of a west bound passenger train (No. 5) which passed over the track about seven minutes before the derailment occurred said that his train rode smoothly at a speed of about 25 miles per hour and that there was no indication of defective track. The division engineer and the roadmaster were making an inspection of the track from the rear car of the same train and neither observed any unusual condition of the track in the vicinity of the derailment. The track was last inspected from a track motor-car about 3 ½ hours before the derailment occurred and no defective condition was observed.

Considering the absence of marks on the ties between the rails, the absence of flange marks on the high rail and the condition of the safety bar after the accident occurred, it is apparent that the engine and the tender were moving at overturning speed when the derailment occurred. It is found that this accident was caused by excessive speed on a curve." [5]

[5] ibid. ICC report No. 3402, July 12, 1951.