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RAILROADING ACCIDENTS IN KERN COUNTY, 1882

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When Col. Baker laid out the town's streets in the late 1860s, citizens talked about railway service eventually reaching the area. To help that possibility along, Citizen's Avenue was renamed Railroad Avenue,¹ the town's principle mercantile business was named Railroad Store, and the masthead of the *Kern County Weekly Courier* added the logo of a little engine. But in the fall of 1874 hopes for a train station came to an end when the Southern Pacific established a train station about a mile east of Bakersfield and named the company's newly-coined town Sumner. Commerce between Bakersfield and its northern neighbors commenced, and in summer of 1876, when the Tehachapi Loop and the 1-1/3-mile-long Newhall Tunnel were completed, commerce blossomed between Bakersfield and the Southland.

Railroad deaths and mayhem were common, but a bit of levity was in the news just a month before a particularly gruesome accident occurred. The editor of the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* found out that rival Bakersfield newspapers had printed conflicting accounts about a mammoth locomotive designed by the Cooke Manufacturing

¹ More than 25 years passed before Railroad Avenue was renamed Truxtun Avenue.

Company of Patterson, New Jersey. It would be used for hard climbs up "Tehachipa Mountain." On its maiden-pull, the 12-wheeler – with 20-inch x 30-inch cylinders -- was either a success or a failure, depending on which newspaper reported the story. The *Tribune* remarked dryly that because the *Daily Californian* said it failed its test and the *Kern County Record* said it was a success, "Somebody lies."

On July 15 the *Record* interviewed Engineer C. Knotts who drove the locomotive on the day of the test. The huge engine, designed to do the work of two 10-wheelers, had departed Sumner with 14 loaded cars, and when it reached Pampa (called Bena today)



the engine took on more water. At Caliente, at the foot of Tehachapi Grade, the Leviathan started losing power, and Knotts was astonished to see foam and bubbles arising in the boiler. The crew detached three cars, and the eleven-car train eventually reached Tehachapi summit. The power loss was a puzzle until Knotts learned that Chinese field hands at Pampa were known to have used the railroad's water tanks for washing clothes.

A month later Bakersfield was reminded that the cost of the new prosperity brought by the Southern Pacific Railroad was the blood of its workers. It was the *Kern Weekly Record* that printed details about the gruesome, early-morning accident at Caliente on July 17.

Around 1:30 AM as an engine jockeyed boxcars into line, Conductor William A. Menchin held his a lantern aloft and made his way into the darkness to find nine boxcars that had been sided. Finding them, he signaled his engine to reverse direction and turned his attention to a loose coupling between two of the cars.

What happened in the next few seconds was a tragic confluence of geography, darkness, error, and incompetence. Some yards away, Brakeman J. S. Spencer had just released the brakes on two of the cars. Because the track was on a slope, they began to roll, and Menchin was pinned between the couplings and crushed at groin level.² He was put on an emergency engine to Sumner but died on the way. That afternoon a Kern County Coroner's Jury brought charges of criminal carelessness against Brakeman Spencer and issued a warrant for his arrest. Conductor Menchin's wife and two children mourned him, his friends at Sumner remembered him as a man of excellent character, and his death became another statistic in Southern Pacific's ledger.



1887. Doheny Memorial Library, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0189

(Representative engine)

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² Briefly mentioned in the Jul 18, 1882 *Los Angeles Times*