

Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Death on the Tehachapi Grade, 1907

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By Gilbert P. Gia

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On a late afternoon in September 1907, Southern Pacific Freight No. 6253 left Tehachapi to start the 3,800-foot descent to Bakersfield on the floor of the San Joaquin Valley below. At the same time, a few miles down track, the four cars that made up Extra Train 2936 were approaching Tunnel 17 on the way to Tehachapi.¹

The extra's lead car was a caboose carrying crew foreman Will Harmon, flagman A. F. Kenny and a dozen or so Greek track workers. Behind the caboose were two flatcars with loads of steel rail and wooden ties, and top of them rested 40 workmen ending their shift and heading home for supper. Behind the extra was the engine operated by Engineer J.F. Frembling, fireman Benjamin I. Crew, conductor Peter E. Carnes, and brakeman L.T. Roberts.

The freight's work orders instructed Engineer Frank L. Woody and Conductor Albert S. Marshall to watch for Extra 2936, which would be waiting at Cabal siding.² Its presence meant the freight would proceed to Tunnel 17, and when the freight reached Cabal a work train was indeed

¹ *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 27, 1907, *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 27, Oct 1 *Bakersfield Morning Echo*

² Sidings between Caliente and Tehachapi were Allard, Bealville, Cliff, Rowen, Woodford, Walong, Marcel, and Cable, spelled Cabal in 1907. Several of them were settlements for work crews.

stopped there. For that reason the freight continued past it at at five miles per hour.

Warning flags on the caboose were in place as it entered Tunnel 17. When the pusher emerged from the tunnel, dead ahead was the freight. Seconds later they collided. The extra's caboose was driven up and over the freight's cab, and, probably in agonizing, slow motion, the freight engine pushed through the flat cars. Gus Vagenas, who was straw boss of 26 men, was on the caboose and his men had been sitting on first flatcar. It was pushed over the side of the mountain.

Most men had jumped before then, but nearly a dozen were left trapped in the debris. As dust settled and the Greeks realized what had happened, they attacked Woody and Marshall still inside the cab, but they armed themselves with a revolver and held off the enraged men long enough to made a run for Tehachapi. With Woody and Marshall gone the Greeks turned their fury against the freight engine, pounding it with rocks and irons, smashing its gauges and breaking out its windows. A Bakersfield newspaper wrote,

"Crazed at the sight of the blood of their comrades, the Greeks who remained alive and uninjured formed a mob which started in swift pursuit of the crew of the freight train which brought death to their friends. An hour later, after a long chase over the rough hill sides of the mountain county, a little group of white-faced breathless railroaders gained the retreat of the mountain town of Tehachapi and appealed to the officers of the law for protection, while below, stalwart officers of the law calmed the angry foreigners who were crying for blood to be shed to avenge that of their countrymen already spilled."³

Telephone communication with Bakersfield was out, but almost immediately after the crash a relief train arrived from Tehachapi. Aboard were Trainmaster Coy, Resident Engineer Burkhalter, Tehachapi Constable Williams, Dr. Van Voorhees, and Nurse Anderson. Three dead were found, and after much careful work 11 were rescued from the rubble.

Around 7:00 P.M. the telegraph operator at Cabal siding was able to make contact with the S.P. at East Bakersfield, and an hour later a wrecker was dispatched to the crash site. At 9:30 P.M. a second train left carrying Southern Pacific District Superintendent Frank M. Worthington, doctors

³ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 27, 1907

Kellogg, West, and Owens, nurses Day and McElroy, Assistant Kern County Coroner W.A. McGinn, and former Kern City Marshal Ham Ferris. Owing to of a broken rail at Keene, the medical train arrived before the wrecker did, but at 1:00 A.M. it showed up and began moving the detailed cars. That was when three more dead were found. Wrote the Bakersfield Californian, "It was hard for their companions to recognize them."⁴



A locomotive of 1907

After telephone communication with East Bakersfield was reestablished, McGinn reported he would hold a coroner's inquest later in the morning, but that did not happen. Freight Engineer Woody, Fireman Sullivan, and Conductor Marshall were missing.

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 28, 1907



Bakersfield Californian, September 27, 1907

In the evening when the inquest did take place, all witnesses were present except for the extra's conductor, J. E. Carnes, who had hurt his arm. He gave a deposition. Brakeman L.T. Roberts of Los Angeles was present, and his story went like this:

"On the day of the wreck we had been engaged in picking up rails between Marcel and Tehachapi. At 5:30 P.M. when we quit work several cars of rails were set off at Marcel. There we got orders to pass [wait for] freight No. 6253 at Cabal, and accordingly started on our way for Cabal. The caboos was in front, then two flat cars carrying Greeks and steel rails, and then the engine. We proceeded slowly. I was standing on the front end of the caboos carrying a red fusée [flare] to aid our white lights and for signaling in front. As we came out of the east portal of Tunnel 17, I saw the freight train coming. It was 10 or 12 car lengths ahead. My first thought was of 'number 1' and after calling for Conductor Carnes who was inside to throw on the air [brakes] and signaling the freight, I jumped with the other brakeman, and we got away. No warning was given to the Greeks, although several of them saw the freight and got off. Our train was going about one or two miles an hour, and when the air set [brakes applied], the train [the Extra] stopped. I think the freight

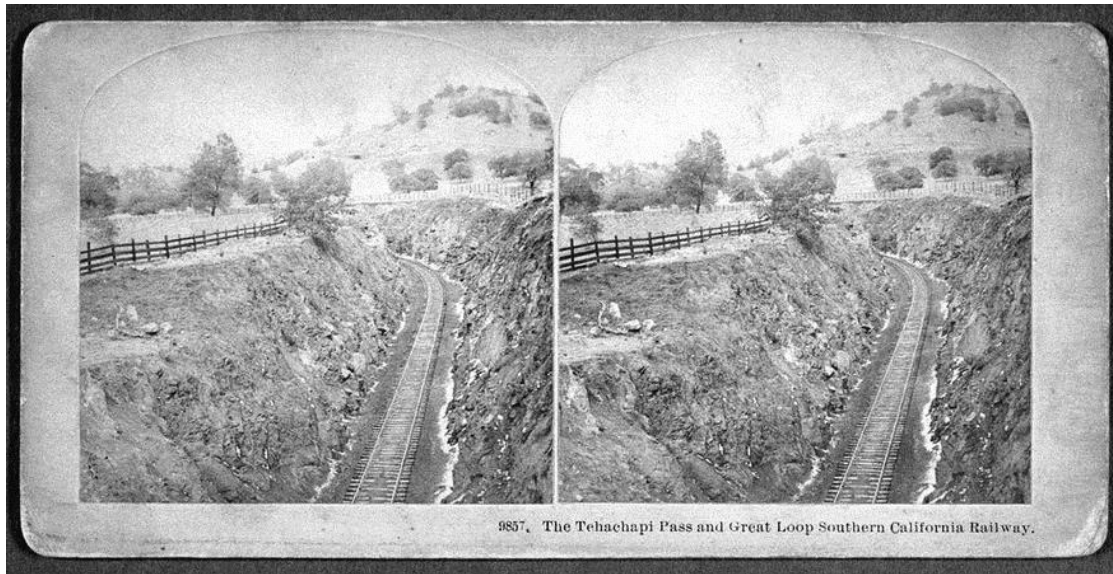
was coming about six or eight miles an hour. The engine hit the caboose about 75 feet from the portal [tunnel]."

Language issues had contributed to the deaths. Foreman Will Harmon of Rosedale was in the caboose just before the crash when he heard the brakeman holler "Throw on the air!" Harmon looked, saw the freight's headlight, jumped off the caboose and yelled to the Greeks to do the same. An instant passed before they understood what he said.

The freight's brakeman J. M. Johnson, of Los Angeles, was questioned about the blocks that made up the signaling system at Cabal. He testified that work was being done to the tracks, and for some reason the blocks had been only "yellow boarded," which signified that they were unreliable. The new information shifted some of the blame from the freight's engineer.

Two hours after the crash the doctors who had come from Tehachapi were still at work, and by then almost 200 Greeks from Tehachapi milled around the wreckage. A bonfire lit the dark sky, discussions were held, and the mood turned angry. If not for the cool-headedness of straw boss Jim Paulos, the crowd might have attacked the medical team. As doctors placed the injured in a boxcar, *"several excitable spirits got to jabbing hysterically to their comrades, but it was explained to them that the injured would be well cared for."* Similarly, when Coroner McGinn tried to identify the dead, voices in the crowd shouted angrily until Jim Paulos stepped forward to interpret. McGinn was allowed to continue his grim work.

That the wrecker sent from East Bakersfield did not arrive on time was probably lucky because Caliente officials had received rumors about mob violence, and officer Ham Ferris and deputies Mort Bell, Charlie Whittaker and C.P. Badger had armed themselves.



Tehachapi Loop, below the accident site

Zelda Mackay Collection of Stereographic Views, University of California, Image 15105

Rail traffic was halted while Kern and Mojave wreckers cleared the track. At 3:00 A.M. the first train allowed through was the southbound Owl from Bakersfield.⁵ Nurse Mrs. McElroy placed six injured on it and accompanied them to the SP hospital at Los Angeles. The next train through was the northbound Overland, and the next was northbound Freight No. 107, which stopped to receive the dead and transport them to Bakersfield.

Kern County Deputy District Attorney Irwin was at the inquest when McGinn questioned freight engineer Woody. *"Mr. Woody, what omission, or omissions, do you consider occurred at Cabal?"* Woody replied, *"That is a pretty hard question to answer."* McGinn repeated the question, and Woody answered, *"Well, we omitted getting the number of the work train."*⁶

The work train that was parked at Cabal siding was, of course, not Extra 2936, but the smash-up could not be blamed entirely on Engineer Woody. One reason was that from his vantage point on the right side of the engine he could not have seen the work train's number. Then there was the matter of the out-of-service signal equipment at Cabal siding that was set to

⁵ "Points of possible confusion are references to east and west vs. north and south. When the Southern Pacific operated the Mojave Subdivision, it like all SP routes were all either eastbound or westbound. Westbound meant you were heading toward San Francisco, east meant away from San Francisco. The Union Pacific changed all that and rescheduled the route as north and south." Email to Gilbert Gia from Stephen A. Montgomery

⁶ Frank Woody was brother of Kern County Supervisor A.J. Woody.

yellow. It should have been "red-boarded, which meant all rail traffic had to stop. Finally, minutes before the crash when Woody had slowed to four miles an hour at Cabal, the sided work train's conductor, a George Burns, swung up onto Woody's engine and asked, "*What are you going to stop for?*" That distracted Woody, and he assumed he was passing the work train named in his orders. Woody answered, "*We're not going to stop.*"

Brief minutes later, Woody turned to Sullivan and asked, "*Did you get the number of that engine we passed?*" The fireman replied, "*I think it was 2602.*" Woody uttered an expletive and reached for his orders, but then he saw the red flair of a train emerging from Tunnel 17. Woody could not stop his freight.



Steam engine, circa 1905. Milt and Betty Younger photo collection

Lack of alertness also contributed to the accident. Coroner McGinn asked the freight crew how long they had been on duty before the crash, and Engineer Woody's answer was that he had been called to work at Bakersfield at 11:45 P.M., on Wednesday night, and at 3:15 A.M. checked out of work at the Mojave station. He said he then cleaned-up and ate and spent seven hours in Mojave but got only about an hour's sleep before his wake-up call for the freight's 3:30 P.M. departure for Bakersfield.

The company's work demands were also a factor. The SP required all crew members to understand their work orders, and that meant everybody was expected to read them. In practice that rule was not observed. When the coroner's jury asked the crew why they did not do that, they insisted that honoring the rule would have added more to their work load than the company paid.



Panagia Prousiotissa Icon
www.panagiaprousiotissa.org/

On Sunday, Bakersfield streets filled with mourners. It seemed that the entire Greek population on this part of the Southern Pacific line had come to town for the funerals.⁷ On Monday they welcomed Greek Consul J. Kapsimalak, attaché John D. Volicretis, and Rev. Father Pashkovsky who had arrived by train from San Francisco. The religious service that morning was four-hours.⁸ In the afternoon, hearses of Morton & Connelly transported six coffins, each inscribed with a white cross and the name of the dead, to Union Cemetery. As solemn burial rites were read, grief-stricken Greeks held burning tapers and wept. Laid to rest in adjoining graves were Tom Carigag, 25, Jim Christos, 30, George Louis, 38, Gus Nicklos, 35; Nick Patros, 35, and Nick Paulas, 34.⁹

On the day of the accident a \$176 roll of First National Bank of Bakersfield greenbacks was found in George Louis's pocket. He was saving for a trip to Greece to visit his wife and children.

Addendum

Retired conductor Stephen A. Montgomery of Bakersfield supplied the following information about the tunnels.

⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 29, 1907. This was probably Rev. Father Thomas N. Pashkovsky from the Eastern Orthodox Church of North America at San Francisco. The Bakersfield newspaper spelled his name Poshkoosky.

⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 30, 1907

⁹ Union Cemetery records

“Around 1874 the Southern Pacific hired Chinese work crews to construct hard-rock tunnels in the mountains between Bakersfield and Tehachapi. That accomplishment is historically important because it took Bakersfield off the list of backwater towns. Today the route from North Bakersfield to Rancho (West Colton) is identified as the Union Pacific Mojave Subdivision.”

“There were originally 16 tunnels between Bakersfield and Tehachapi. They were numbered one through 17, skipping the number 13. After the flood of 1884 that washed out the tracks between Pampa (now Bena) and Caliente, the Southern Pacific rerouted its track to a higher elevation necessitating another tunnel west (North) of Tunnel 1. Because by this time the other tunnels had already been completed and were in use, the new tunnel was identified as Tunnel ½.”

“In 1983 another flood washed out tracks west of Tunnel ½ and with it the last vestiges of the old, pre-Tunnel ½ trestles. The carrier responded by double tracking the line from West switch Ilmon to Caliente, removing the westward siding from operating service retaining much of it as a utility spur. The tracks were restored as “multiple main lines” with two CTC lines from former East switch now CP (Control Point) Caliente to the former West Switch now CP Ilmon. Tunnel ½ was removed and a large cut now replaces it to make way for the two main lines.”

“Signor refers to Tunnel 4 as being “daylighted.”¹⁰ Actually it was bypassed and its concrete and steel structure left in place serving as a retaining wall. That portion of the mountain next to the tunnel is unstable, and a major seismic event could cause more problems for this portion of the track and for nearby Tunnel 3. Extensive shoring and stabilization work between Tunnels 3 and 4 has been done in recent years.”

“Here are the tunnels remaining today: Still in use are Tunnels 1 and 2 between Caliente and Bealville, and Tunnels 3 and 5 between Bealville and Cliff. During the 1952 quakes Tunnel 5 also had a partial collapse at the west end, and the Southern Pacific built a temporary shoofly around it. Its 14% and 15% curves were so tight that negotiating them was difficult, and “straight line” derailments were common. After several months of repair to Tunnel 5, the shoofly was abandoned. A concrete floor supports the tracks at the west end of Tunnel 5 over an open fissure that opened up during the quakes.”

“Except at the portals, Tunnel 8 is the only one not lined with concrete and steel but instead has exposed granite in the passage. Tunnel 9 at The Loop just north of Walong is underneath the tracks at siding Walong and was cut through natural terrain with added fill to support the track above as part of the Loop and Walong siding. Tunnel 10 is immediately

¹⁰ Signor, John R. *Southern Pacific-Santa Fe Tehachapi*: Golden West Books, 1983

south of siding Walong. Tunnel 12 was not much more than a glorified arch cut through quartz strata and was daylighted shortly after it was cut. Next up the hill are four closely spaced tunnels, 14 through 17, that are between siding Marcel and CP Cable at the beginning of two main tracks. That makes a total of 11 tunnels on the Tehachapi still in service."

Bibliography

"Signor, John R. *Southern Pacific-Santa Fe Tehachapi*: Golden West Books, 1983

***Southern Pacific Los Angeles Division Timetable 10*, effective 12:01 a.m. Sunday, April 30, 1978**

***Union Pacific Los Angeles Area Timetable #5*, effective 0900 Monday, October 28, 2013"**

Notes

"Having first hired out in train and yard service with the Southern Pacific in 1969, Montgomery retired from the Union Pacific in July 2010. He worked much of his career on the Tehachapi route.

Southern Pacific referred to this route like all their routes as East and West, Westward being toward their headquarters at 1 Market Street, San Francisco and called Milepost 0. Union Pacific uses all four directions and defines this route as North and South, North being towards Sacramento. The UP has retained the SP milepost numbers. "

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