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March 21, 2000

L.A. THEN AND NOW

City's Worst Train Crash Left 30 Dead, 130 Hurt

In 1956, about 15 miles from the recent tragedy, passenger cars jumped tracks near downtown.

February 06, 2005 | Cecilia Rasmussen | Times Staff Writer

On a clear, crisp evening almost 50 years ago, a passenger train hurtled off a curve near the Los Angeles River, killing 30 people and injuring 130. The 1956 incident -- about 15 miles from last month's accident that killed 11 -- was Los Angeles' deadliest rail disaster.

Three of the dead and nearly half the injured were children, in part because the crash happened on a Sunday. More than a dozen children were orphaned.

"I saw Daddy fly through the air," Tommy Ferguson, 6, told reporters as he sat in his hospital bed the next day, his arm broken. His 3-year-old sister, Cindy, who had minor injuries, snuggled next to him. Neither knew that their parents, Tom and Lila Ferguson of La Mesa in San Diego County, had been killed.

It was early evening that Jan. 22 as the Santa Fe Railway's Los Angeles-to-San Diego train rolled south out of Union Station. Afternoon rain had made the rails slick, and the San Diegan was picking up speed -- too much speed.

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Tuesday February 08, 2005 Home Edition Main News Part A Page 2 National Desk 1 inches; 51 words Type of Material: Correction

1956 train crash -- The L.A. Then and Now column in Sunday's California section reported that the train involved in a fatal crash in 1956 consisted of two passenger cars and a locomotive. There was no locomotive; the two cars were self-propelled and controlled by the crew from within the cars.

About 3 1/2 miles from the station, the two-car train and locomotive bore down on a 15 mph curve at 70. The engineer tried to brake at the last minute, but the train flew off the tracks at the Redondo junction, near Washington Boulevard and Soto Street.

Sparks flying, the train lurched, then swayed twice before flipping onto its left side and skidding across 500 feet of rail and dirt. As seats tore loose, 178 passengers desperately struggled to survive. Those on the left took the brunt of the impact.

"I was sitting in the back seat on the right side, and the people sitting on the left side didn't have a chance," flagman Bill Hines told reporters. "They were sucked right out the windows."

Seven of the dead were found beneath the left side of the train.

When the cars stopped, passengers scrambled amid wreckage in the dark, climbing out through windows.

"There wasn't any screaming or anything like that," said Gary Anderson, 7, who was unhurt. His mother and 3-year-old brother, Dale, were both injured.

"I fell down on my hands and knees," Gary told reporters. "Dale went over too, and all these bags and things came falling down on him."

Passengers helped save each other. Four servicemen and a 13-year-old Arcadia boy crawled through the wreckage in response to strangers' groans, freeing about 20 people.

"It was the worst thing I ever saw," Navy seaman Samuel F. Wareham, one of the rescuers, told reporters. "There were six corpses without heads lying outside the train."

The train's engineer, Frank B. Parrish, 61, was seen crying in the arms of his wife, who had been on the train. "I disobeyed the rules," he kept repeating, according to testimony at the inquest.

Within an hour of the 5:42 p.m. crash, KTTV-TV Channel 11 had arrived and begun broadcasting live. Radio and other television stations interrupted programming with news of the disaster and called for volunteers.

Hordes descended on the site, and they weren't all good Samaritans. As hundreds of volunteers lined up to give blood, looky-loos created bumper-to-bumper traffic along Washington Boulevard, causing havoc for ambulances. Looters stole jewelry, money and other valuables from the dead and injured.

Movie studios donated floodlights for the search. Doctors, nurses and clergymen arrived to tend the victims, while Salvation Army and Red Cross workers consoled grief-stricken survivors and relatives.

The scene was chaotic. A dozen agencies gave sometimes-conflicting orders to railroad workers and the media. Well-meaning volunteers tried to send away victims' bodies without the coroner's approval, and frantic relatives went from hospital to hospital in search of loved ones.

A young mother and her 23-month-old son, returning home from a friend's bridal shower, were among the dead. So were an insurance man and his son, 7. A 17-year-old bride of one month was killed on her way to see her Marine husband at Camp Pendleton. Albert and Marcia Fenn of Lakeside, in San Diego County, died too; they had five children at home, ages 3 to 10.

The next day, Parrish spoke to reporters, officials and doctors from his hospital bed.

With trembling hands and an anguished smile, he said he had briefly blacked out and thought he was running through an orange grove on a section of the line with a 70 mph speed limit. He said the assistant engineer, Homer Smith, 42, yelled to "throw her into emergency" with what railway workers call the dead-man brake, but it was too late.

At the inquest, Parrish broke down in tears. "The responsibility is solely mine," he testified. "I think the only mistake the other crew members made was that they had too much confidence in me. They waited too long to take action." A government investigation determined that the train had been traveling 70 mph. Police launched their own investigation -- assuming that the high speed meant criminal negligence -- but no charges were filed.

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