

A Railroader's Editorial

On November 15, 2000, a BNSF train stuck a semi-truck at a grade crossing in Fruita, CO. Unfortunately, accidents such as these are all too common and the perspective we receive is usually from those related to the individual in the automobile or truck and not the railroaders involved. Tom Holley, a BNSF employee, shared his perspective on this accident with the DRGW e-mail list. He has graciously allowed me to post his letter for others to read. Below is an article from the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel about the accident followed by Tom's thoughts on train/vehicle crossing accidents.

Truck driver dies in crash with train

By RACHEL SAUER The Daily Sentinel

A Milliken man died Tuesday morning when his truck was hit by a train as he crossed railroad tracks in Fruita. Brent Wayne Alexander, 25, was killed at about 7:25 a.m. when he drove his tractor trailer north over the railroad tracks at the 300 block of South Mesa Avenue. His truck was hit by a westbound Burlington Northern and Santa Fe freight train. The 3,500-foot, three-engine train took about half a mile to stop, said Fruita Police Chief Lowell Richardson.

"We have nothing yet from the investigation to determine actually what was going on with the driver of the semi," Richardson said. "No independent witnesses can pin down why the driver drove over the tracks."

Alexander had been dropping off a load of grain at the Fruita Co-Op, Richardson said.

The truck's cab was ripped from the trailer and split in half on impact and the truck's gas tanks ignited, possibly caused by a spark from the train stopping, Richardson said. The train dragged the ignited half of the truck's cab for about 100 yards before it fell off beside the tracks. Lower Valley Fire Department personnel put out the fire. Smoke from the fire caused the train's front engine to fill with smoke. The train's engineer and two other crew members were treated at Community Hospital for smoke inhalation.

A hazardous materials team responded to the scene, Richardson said, but there were no hazardous materials concerns. Richardson said the Fruita Police Department and Colorado State Patrol were still investigating late Tuesday. The railroad crossing lights and audible signals were working at the time of the crash, the Colorado State Patrol said. The train also signaled with its horn and lights.

I wish I could relate to you what it is like going down a track at 50 mph and hitting a semi. I wasn't on the BNSF train that was involved in the Fruita tragedy, but I was on one a few weeks earlier when the train hit a semi loaded with salt at 50 mph. The reaction time was long enough to think about some of the possibilities like God I hope that thing isn't loaded with car batteries, or coleman fuel, bricks, propane bottles etc., etc.

I saw him run a flashing red light, run a stop sign and pull onto the main track ahead of us, thank the Lord his tractor made it over and we hit his trailer just ahead of the wheels. Like I said we had a little time to react, we placed the train in emergency, bailed off the drivers, jumped to the floor, covered up our eyes and heads with what we could and asked, why did that SOB run the stop signs?? After the impact I expected to be on the ground at 45-50 mph plowing through the dirt, asphalt and feeling the 6000 tons of train behind us with LPG, Sodium Hydrosulfied, Sulfuric Acid, Fuel oils, gasoline, Anhydrous Ammonia and all the other stuff we had following us at 50 mph too. And all because this guy didn't think he had 45 seconds to let our train go by...

After we hit this guy I remember feeling the wheels still turning and Holy sh*t, we were still on the rails!! I don't believe it, we weren't on fire and we were still together... We had a big majority of this guys trailer wrapped around the front of our SD75. The impact broke the glass in front but it didn't shatter out and all the handrails on the front were bent back into the door so we couldn't get out that way. Luckily we could get out the back door. We secured the train and then the hard part, go back and see what happened to the so called "victims of the accident." Well this truck driver had his 2 yr. old son and, no kidding, his wife, 7 mo. pregnant, in the tractor with him. He was mad and said "you guys came out of nowhere." Hard for me to believe, but he was mad at us. I will go to my grave wondering why we didn't go on the ground, and no body got as much as a scratch on them.

This guy in Fruita was 25 yr. old and I'm guessing in a hurry too, and to beat all went down the wrong road, turned around and didn't see a witness' attempt to stop him and got hit by a C44-9 at 50 MPH right on the tractor. I have talked to the crew, their ordeal won't be going away anytime soon. They saw him and had little time to do nothing but "plug it" and hit him. Then there was a fuel fire all over the front of the unit, they were trapped by the metal on the front and surrounded by fire, so they couldn't get out without burning. What do you do in the moment, break out a window and try to get out that way? I think unless it was already broke you would have a hell-u-va time breaking bullet proof glass. Or do you brave the fire and try to get out through the back door? Or do you just wait and either die of fire or let it hopefully burn out. Thank God the latter took place and they got smoke inhalation and a rather nasty case of Why(s).

Why did this happen to us? Why was this guy here at the exact same time I was? Why am I not dead? Maybe, If I had just taken more time before we left he wouldn't have been there when we were. Why didn't he hear that Horn? Why didn't he stop when he saw those flashing red lights? Why was he in such a hurry? How long am I going to feel like this? Will I ever be able to go over a crossing at grade without seeing this again? Why is it the news always says we hit them? They are the only ones with a steering wheel and enough brakes to stop in time. In some cruel way

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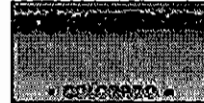
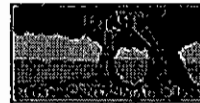
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