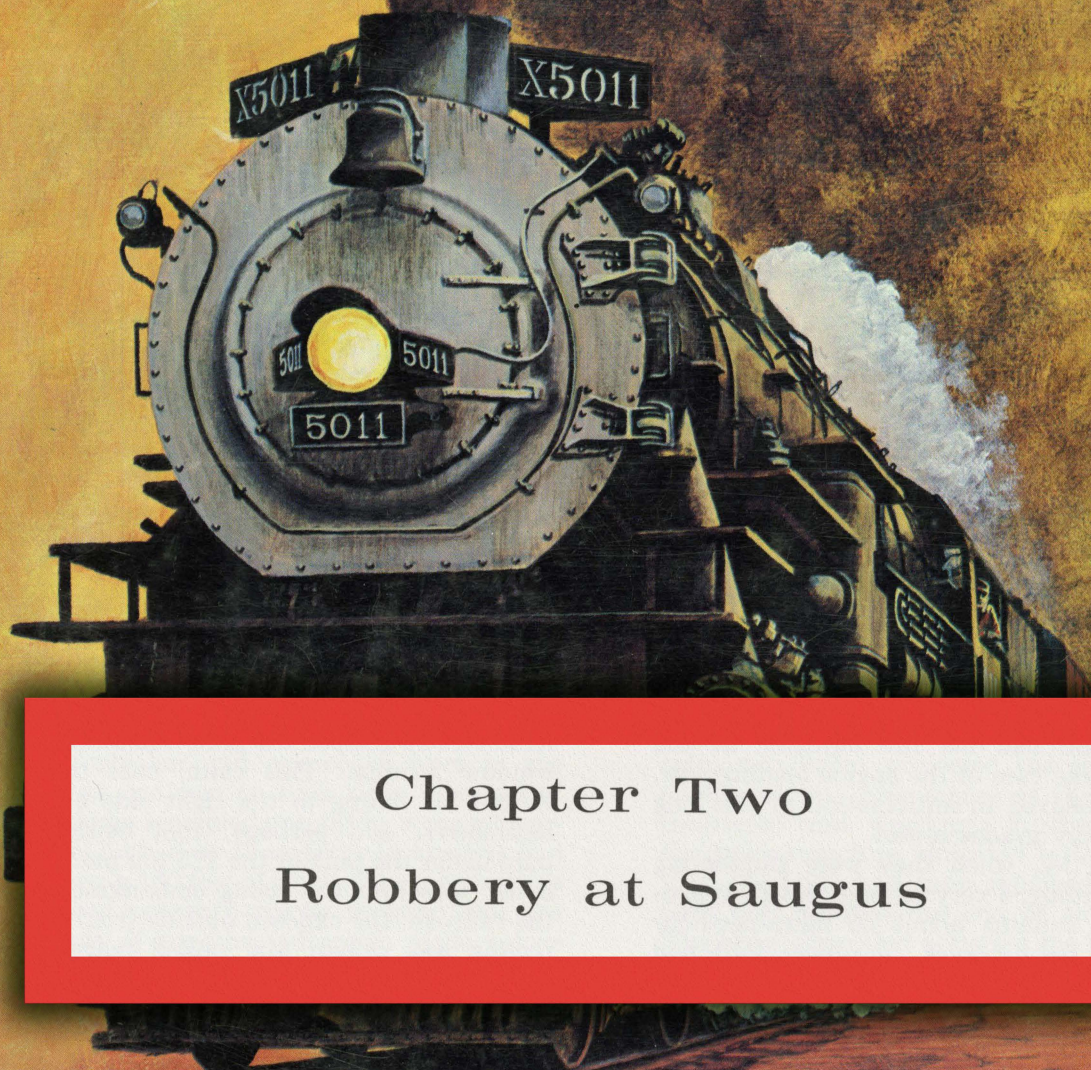


# 4-10-2

## THREE BARRELS OF STEAM

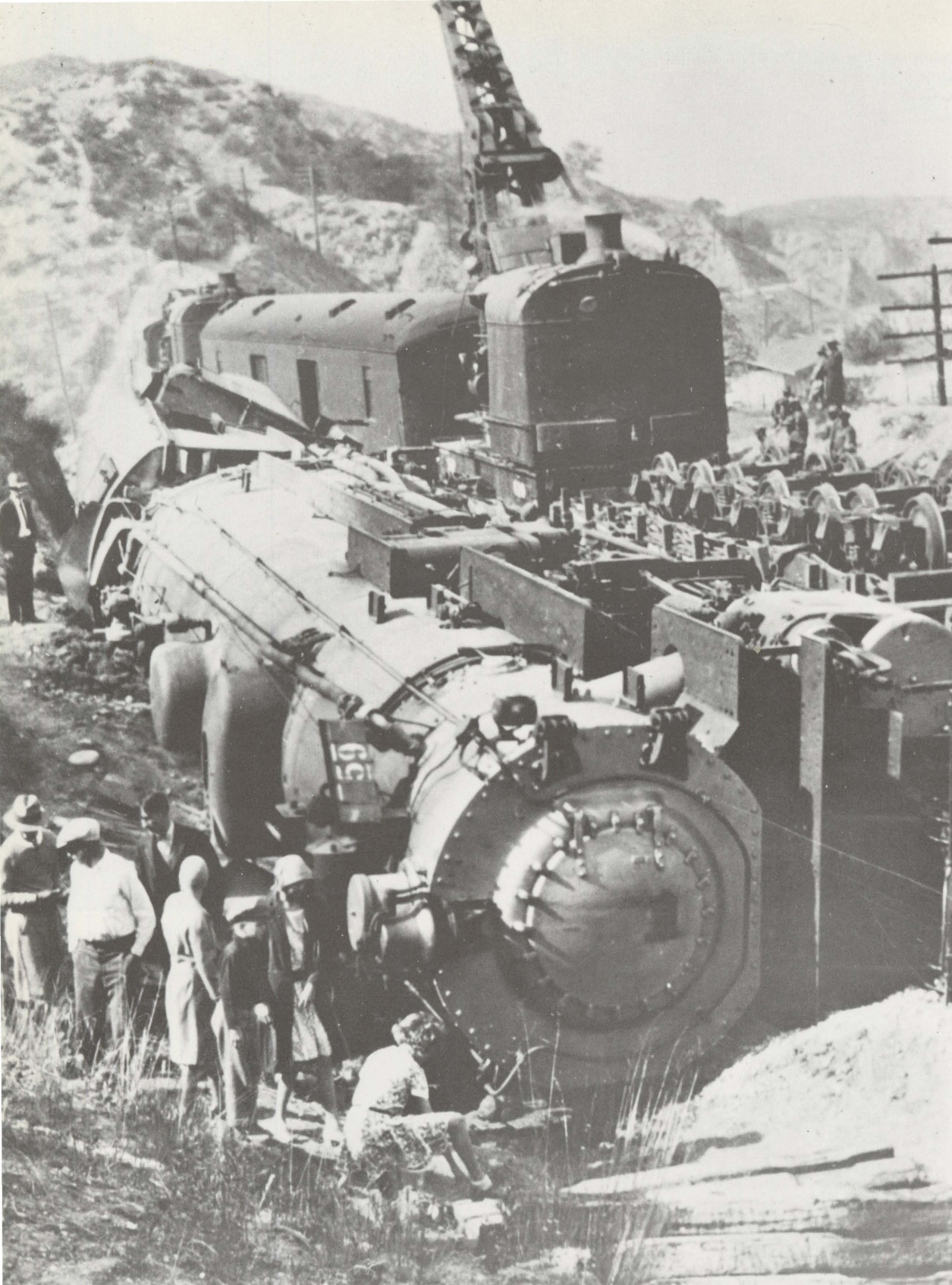
by  
James E. Boynton



Chapter Two  
Robbery at Saugus

*Kotowski*





Courtesy Sam Zachery.

West Coast Limited's locomotive awaits rescue as relief train with two wreckers stands by on temporary "shoe-fly." Notice displacement of cab in which Engineer Richard Ball was trapped. The wrecking took place between Saugus, California and Honby Station (M.P. 447) on the Mojave Sub-division of the San Joaquin Division. White stains on the boiler and cab indicate areas in contact with escaping high pressure steam. The outside throttle rigging caught onto embankment pulling throttle wide open. The spinning drivers — although terrifying to contemplate — rapidly depleted the boiler pressure — a contributing factor in the engineer's survival.



## Chapter Two

# Robbery at Saugus

The big three barreled locomotive had just completed the momentary station stop at Saugus, California, and the dull metallic clank of the manhole cover on the big Vanderbilt tender indicated that Fireman Robert C. Fowler had her filled with water. Hands gripping the rear eaves of the cab, Bob dropped down onto the sandbox and then slid across the glossy steel deck to the seatbox on the left side of the big 4-10-2. Engineer Richard C. Ball caught the conductor's tossed lantern signal, released the air brakes, and eased the throttle open, gently taking the slack from the Limited so as not to awaken any of the sleeping passengers. Fowler increased his firing rate to match the blasting exhaust of the accelerating engine, and checked the pulsating needle on his feedwater heater pump gauge, making sure that he was supplying the increasing demand for boiler water. As he overfired, the fire-door rumbled and the damper levers jumped in their retainers but soon settled down as the exhaust smoothed out with increased speed. Ball called across the vibrating cab to Bob, saying to him, "Well Bob, it has been a nice trip so far." Little did the old engineer know that these words were to portend a direct reversal of how things would become.

Although it was one of the many pauses on the scenic run north to Portland, Oregon and Seattle, the importance of this daily occurrence was soon to be eclipsed by an avalanche of sensational newspaper copy. Southern Pacific train No. 59, the West Coast Limited, was soon swallowed by the darkening gloom as she pounded her way toward Mojave, California. The quiet Sunday evening was filled with the strangely haunting off-beat exhaust of the huge dual purpose locomotive. The little knot of humanity leaving the dimly illuminated station platform was suddenly filled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness as the last fading echoes of the beautiful Nathan chime whistle came whispering back from the walls of

Mint Canyon. Engine 5042 had left the Los Angeles, California passenger depot at about 6:30 P.M. with her 12 car train, and the date was November 10, 1929. Bob Fowler had bumped as fireman on the passenger run, and it was his first trip since displacing the regular man. Fowler had failed to show for the run, and Sam Zachery\* was called by the crew dispatcher to fire the fast passenger train. Sam Zachery had prepared 5042 for the "varnish" run over the Tehachapi Mountains to Bakersfield, California where the joint Southern Pacific—Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad tracks spilled out onto the vast, fertile San Joaquin Valley. Engineer Ball and his emergency fireman were leaving the roundhouse preparatory to moving the big three-cylinder 4-10-2 through the yards to the passenger depot when Bob Fowler showed up for work. In a decision that was later to prove to Zachery's advantage, Sam allowed Fowler to assume his rightful position as fireman on No. 59 that fateful night.

As the train blasted through Saugus yard, the clear green light in the leaving block signal was mirrored on the polished rails as the two enginemen verbally acknowledged the proceed indication. Ball was working 5042 pretty hard now, and was really "knockin' apples" as he tried to get the heavy train back up to track speed and on the "advertised" again. The vivid greenish-yellow beam of the headlight swept the barren hills of the Santa Clara River Canyon, and the last nostalgic sounds of the rumbling train, sounding like distant thunder, rolled back from the mountains giving hint to the uninformed that perhaps a railroad threaded this desolation.

Train No. 59 was now committed to an uneventful journey that crossed the rocky wastes of the ridge and near-desert, and she would soon

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\*Southern Pacific-San Joaquin Division engineer, Seniority No. 1 (1971).



turn north and tackle the heavy grades toward Tehachapi Summit. The activity in the hot spacious cab had settled down to routine chores and the brilliant pulsing glare at the throbbing fire-door reflected from the cluster of brass-bound gauges that covered the sloping back head of the huge boiler. Bob had his fire adjusted at the proper rate to take care of the engine loading now, and both men relaxed in anticipation of the long drag up the heavy grades ahead.

About 7:55 P.M., when they were thundering toward Honby siding, a very strange thing happened. They were running about 25 miles-per-hour because of the tight curves. Engineer Ball had just reached down to make his final adjustment with the reverse lever to regulate his power for speed setting. Fowler made the corresponding change in his fire by means of his oil regulating valve in time to keep the flames from kicking out the fire-door. As the big rigid locomotive eased into a left hand curve, unfamiliar motion gripped the action of the engine. Instantly the engine crew knew something was wrong. As they looked along the length of the huge boiler, the headlight and cylinders danced crazily and a torrential cascade of fire and red hot sparks shot back from under the spinning drivers. As their world fell out from underneath them, 5042 slid onto the ties with an unnerving surge. Instantly the big *Southern Pacific Class* engine proceeded to grind up the track fixtures in an awesome display of fireworks that was more appreciated on the Fourth of July.

In the churning cab the maze of controls was but a blur to the "hogger" who somehow found the H-6 automatic brake valve and quickly placed the handle in emergency position. The response was immediate as the cab filled with the explosive report of the emergency application. Engineer Ball quickly slammed the throttle into the closed position, his gloved hand scribing a vicious arc toward the boiler head. This last violent action was done in the manner well reminiscent of the prize ring tradition. The increasing violence of the three-cylinder locomotive's transit along the ties indicated to the engine crew that she was hellbent to turn herself over. Their suspicions were promptly confirmed as the undulating locomotive gave a sickening roll to the right, throwing Dick Ball into the front corner of his cab. As the right side of the boiler and cab tore into the right-of-way, the impact ripped the cab braces to the boiler loose, and the air was permeated with the acrid odor of hot crude oil and burning steel. Bob Fowler instantly rammed the oil regulating valve, pulling the fire from the boiler, thus eliminating chances of firing the wreckage. In just a matter of seconds, proud, stately train No. 59 was

plunged into serious trouble as the crippled locomotive crunched to rest on her right side in a choking cloud of steam and dust. In an act of self-preservation, the fireman hooked his left leg over his arm rest as the heavy three-cylinder 4-10-2 ploughed into the ballast and his gauntleted hand tightly gripped the grab-iron above the canvas window awning. This calm, cool thinking prevented his falling to the right side of the sliding locomotive, and perhaps from being ground to pulp under the bulk of the 225 ton monster. As the boiler tore into the rising embankment alongside the railroad, the exposed outside front end throttle rigging was caught and pulled rearward causing the huge locomotive's cylinders to again be filled with steam.

The helpless steamer lay with spinning drivers churning away on her right side like a stricken animal in its final death throes. What a fearful sight this must have been . . . a flailing locomotive lying on its boiler, throttle wide open, and with no possible chance for anyone to close it. The whole scene was shrouded in clouds of roaring steam because the boiler blow-off valve had been torn from the right side of the firebox when it ripped into the ground. This powerful jet of high-pressure steam and scalding water was deflected into the cab, seriously burning the trapped engineer. Superheated steam pipes ruptured in the displaced cab, adding their deadly hot vapors of hissing steam to the catastrophe. Dick Ball was in a deadly situation as he found himself trapped between his seatbox and the front of 5042's crushed cab with no route of escape. Fowler clung to the outer surface of the wildly surging cab as the vibrating engine tried to destroy itself in a fit of unregulated frustration. Bob well knew that if he was thrown from his perch into the spinning drivers and lashing valve gear he would be torn into a million pieces.

After what seemed an eternity, the pressures of the boiler fell below the value necessary to power the drivers of the big SP-3 engine, and she finally died, accepting the undignified fate she so little deserved. Bob Fowler then stepped from the sides of the cab across the open gangway and cautiously crawled along the slippery sides of the massive Vanderbuilt tender until he reached the rear end of the huge tank. There on the ground beneath him he recognized Ed Crumply, a dead-heading engineer who had come up from the coaches to help the crew of the derailed locomotive. Ed invited the "tallerpot" down to terra again, and in his haste, Bob failed to notice that the canted tender was suspended high above the torn roadbed. As he slid down the rounded sides of the tender at an ever increasing speed, he realized that he was



again involved in a desperate situation. Luckily he fell into Crumpley's outstretched arms, and they both staggered to the ties in one of the few amusing incidents associated with this terrible disaster.

Fowler surveyed the accident scene. In the dim glow of the coach lights he could see that the baggage car, smoker and one coach were in the ditch; the first two over on their sides. The rest of the stricken train remained upright by some miraculous stroke of luck, even though the locomotive had destroyed nearly 160 feet of track. The men hurried to the crushed cab with rescue in mind, but the searing clouds of superheated steam made rescue problematical. The piercing screams of the tortured engineer drove them to overcome their discouragement, and after the heat of the roaring steam eased a bit, two waiters from No. 59's dining car used their flashlights to locate Engineer Ball. Fowler and several men who were on the immediate scene then plucked the courageous engineer from the jaws of a horribly painful death. As they emerged from the crumbled vapor-filled cab with the scalded engineer, they were met by Dr. F. H. Campbell of Williams, California who was a passenger on the West Coast Limited.

The doctor helped remove Ball from the wreckage, and then proceeded to administer first aid to his extensive burns. A local Southern Pacific Company surgeon was summoned from Newhall, California and the engine crew was removed to a hospital at Newhall for emergency treatment. Bob was to spend two weeks in the hospital, recuperating at home during the following three weeks. Thorough examination disclosed that Fowler was suffering from a badly burned leg and several dislocated vertebrae. The plucky fireman credited the suction at the fire-door of the wide open throttled 4-10-2 with drawing most of the deadly hot steam from his side of the locomotive. Engineer Ball was not so fortunate. Because the seriousness of his burns required that he again be moved; he was transferred to the White Memorial Hospital in Los Angeles where he was placed under intensive care. Richard Ball started a pain-wracked recovery that cost him ten months of confinement while undergoing treatment for his critically burned body. It is the author's considered opinion that if the throttle rigging on 5042 had not been torn wide open, Ball would have been cooked from his frame before the pressure of the boiler was reduced by the relatively small opening formed by the boiler blow-off valve.

Prior to the arrival of any law enforcement officers, Conductor O. C. French checked his passengers for injuries, and having found none of them hurt, hurried back along the crushed rock

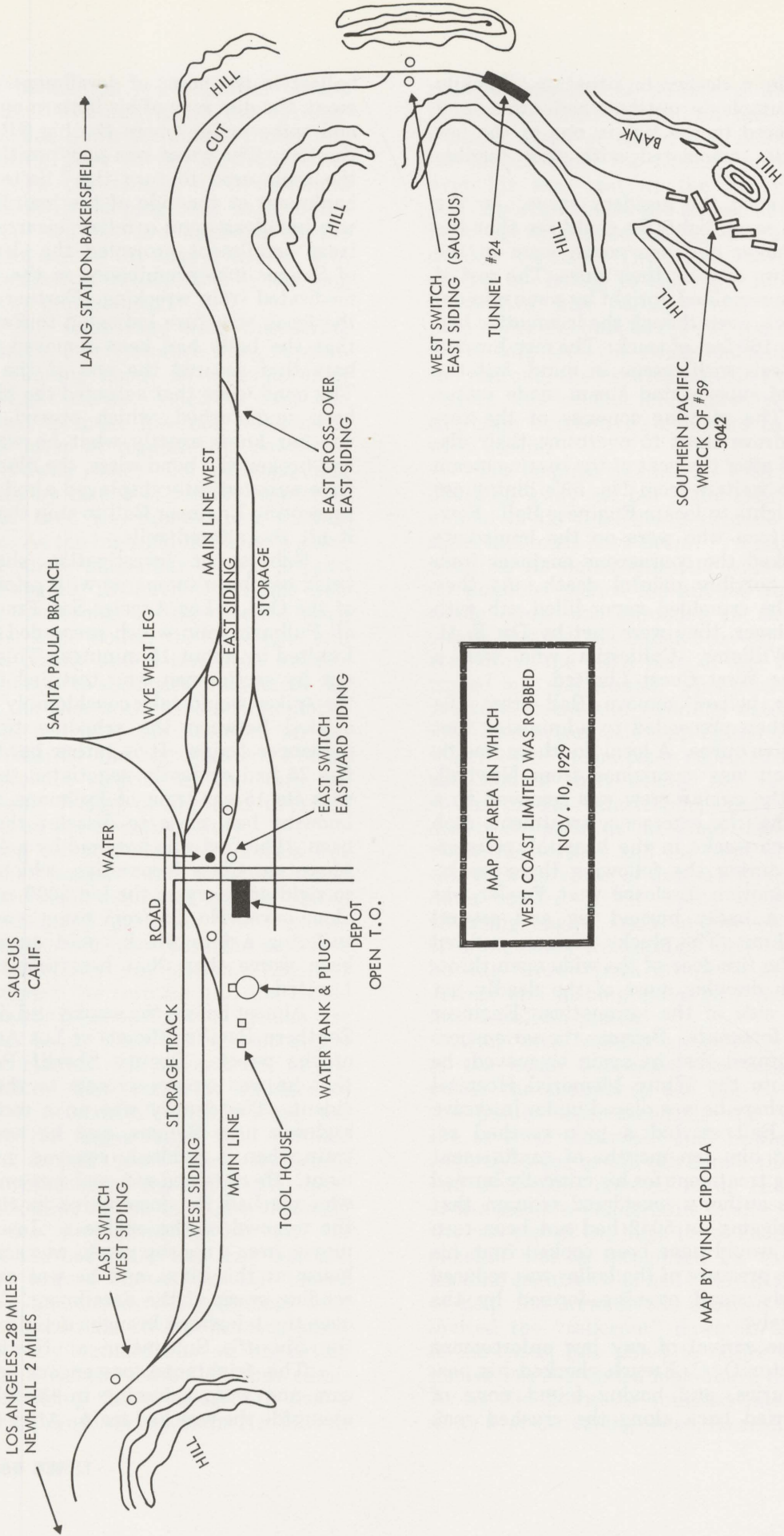
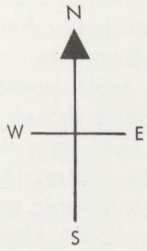
ballast to the point of derailment. To his amazement, the dim rays of his lantern outlined a wrench and spike puller where the big SP-3 had first hit the ties. The proof was now positive . . . here lay the tools used to turn the Limited into the embankment at the side of the mainline. The alarm was broadcast, and a rather bizarre case of simple train derailment projected the sleepy little town of Saugus into prominence as the locale of a pre-meditated train wrecking. Further examination of the track structure indicated to Conductor French that the bolts had been removed from the angle bars that secured the end of the rails together. The bond wires that actuated the block signals had been undisturbed, which proved that the train wrecker knew exactly what he was doing. If he had broken the bond wires, the block signals would have automatically displayed a red aspect, thereby prompting Engineer Ball to stop the Limited before it hit the altered rails.

Subsequent investigation showed that the track had been tampered with prior to the passage of the Owl, a Los Angeles-San Francisco overnight all Pullman train which preceded the West Coast Limited by about 15 minutes. This fact was borne out by sectionmen who testified that removal of the spikes would take considerably more time than existed between the schedule time of the two passenger trains. It is rather hard to realize, but No. 25 had evidently negotiated the loosened rails with its 15 car train of Pullmans, without anyone knowing how close to disaster they had actually been. The Owl was powered by a 4300 series 4-8-2 Mountain Class locomotive, which was not quite so rigid or heavy as the big 5000 engine. This fact alone saved No. 25 from being wrecked, and from suffering a fate which could quite possibly have been worse than that besetting the West Coast Limited.

Almost before the smoke and dust had cleared, Southern Pacific officials at Los Angeles had word of the wreck. Deputy Sheriff Pember reported that he was an eye-witness to the disastrous accident. The deputy was on a motorcycle on the highway near Saugus, and he was watching the train when it suddenly swerved into the embankment. He obtained aid, and was one of the persons who reached the locomotive in time to assist in the removal of the engineer. Jose Pablo, an employee from a nearby ranch, was asleep in the bunk house at this time, and he was awakened by the rending crash of the derailment. His frantic calls over the telephone brought deputies speeding from the Sheriff's Substation at Newhall.

The frightened passengers spilled from the cars and were shivering in the gloomy darkness alongside the wrecked train. After the initial shock





MAP OF AREA IN WHICH  
 WEST COAST LIMITED WAS ROBBED  
 NOV. 10, 1929

MAP BY VINCE CIPOLLA



of the jolting wreck had somewhat subsided, and the near panic had eased, they were told that the only persons injured were the veteran engineer and fireman. With respect to the primary evidence that this incident was a criminal case of train wrecking, The Southern Pacific Railroad alerted its Chief Special Agent Dan O'Connell in San Francisco and also notified the Police Chief at Burbank, California. About 15 minutes after the train had derailed, the passengers were told to re-train by a nervous little man who seemed to be in authority. He told them that the undamaged portion of the train would soon be pulled back to Saugus by a relief locomotive. Most of the passengers complied in an effort to expedite their return to some semblance of normalcy, and they entered the Pullmans at the rear of the train. Then a most amazing thing happened, much to the chagrin of the excited victims. In a complete reversal from his humanitarian attitude, the man with the professed authority produced an object that left little doubt that he was in complete charge of the situation.

The .38 caliber pistol that he held in his trembling hand added substance to his caustic snarl that this indeed was a robbery. In just a few terror stricken moments it was discovered that a train derailment was to become a criminal act of premeditated wrecking, and now it was being compounded into a dastardly crime of armed robbery. The 15 minute interval between the moment the 5042 rolled over on its side, and the arrival of the hold-up men in the coaches, led to much speculation. The officers were unable to account for this waiting period, except to substantiate that the intent to commit the robbery was a sudden decision made in a deranged mind. The authorities also believed that the train reached the spike-less rails while the wrecker, in a sadistic state of overwhelming joy, stood in the bushes near the track, and happily watched as the engine and cars piled into the ditch. It was only by the grace of God that 5042 negotiated a high fill while bouncing along the ties. If she had plunged off the grade and tumbled down the high embankment, many of the passengers would have probably suffered the same fate as the engine crew, and the casualty list would have been large.

The robber then shoved the short barreled "heater" into the conductor's back, and commanded him to enter the coaches against his will. Being a man with good ability to reason, Conductor French went along with the robber, well realizing that discretionary action negated the possibility of his becoming a prematurely entombed hero. Five persons said they were herded into one coach of the train, and were held quiescent

at pistol point but not robbed. These people were: Mrs. S. E. Brown, Bakersfield; Mrs. Robert Rasmus, Bakersfield; Mrs. H. Schacht, Chicago; Miss Helen Lowe, Chicago; Miss Ann Stowell, Sacramento. The erratic behavior of the bandit proved to benefit Miss Ann Henry, a stenographer from Sacramento who said: "Of course I was terrified, and immediately tore off my rings and handed them to the bandit." He smiled and said: "I don't want 'em lady, keep 'em." Not so fortunate was Mr. Mc Mullen who was standing next to her at this time. Evidently the robber found him much less alluring, but much more interesting than Miss Henry, and this cost Mr. Mc Mullen \$30. Dr. Campbell and Dr. W. P. O'Rourke of Seattle, Washington were on errands of mercy which resulted in their being overlooked by the bandit. Both had rushed forward, realizing that crew members and passengers doubtlessly were injured and in need of medical aid. This humanitarian act saved Dr. O'Rourke \$100 and the embarrassment of facing the gunman. As the bandit went from victim to victim, an all pervading sense of doom gripped them. The man, wearing a blue bandana handkerchief, waved his gun under their noses with reckless abandon. They had already survived a terrible train wreck, only to find themselves placed in double jeopardy by a five and one-half foot idiot who demanded cash or life.

A lady named Mrs. Hoffman, 74 years of age, was badly frightened by the bandit. "I was sleeping soundly when the wreck awakened me," she declared. "Then all of a sudden the curtains of my berth parted and here was a gun sticking in my face. A gruff voice demanded my money and you can bet I handed him all I could find, which was \$25, and as quickly as I could." Pompey J. Anderson, Negro porter, readily admitted that he was "scared." "Ya Sir — Boy ah'm still shaking. Ah never was so glad to see anybody leave in all my life."

This kind of experience was an accepted risk for travelers by railroad in the Jesse James era, but was this not a civilized west now? It was inconceivable that such an amazing event could transpire in this modern world just a few miles removed from the gaudy jungle of lights of one of America's largest cities. Historically, and by custom, these type adventures had been relegated to the dusty files of a conquered wilderness once known as the western plains. It was hard to rationalize that the wild and wooly west had been tamed for many years, especially while being subjected to such indignities as looking down a gun barrel which looked as big as a tunnel bore. So felt Mr. Irwin Bennett, a retired banker from Manchester, England who was enroute to Willows, California



to visit his niece. With a reserve tempered by many years of financial decision making, he related in a stentorian voice that: "It was really quite an experience. I had begun to think all these tales of your wild west were fiction, but now I can see they are based on fact. It was my first ride in this part of the country." Mr. Bennett did not so state, but it would involve little speculation to assume that this was his last trip through such uncivilized country.

Incredulous though it was, the robbery progressed and the bandit stated that he was a local rancher and was interested in money only. He kept a running conversation with his victims, and for reasons known only to himself, often removed his cloth mask and exposed his face. The passengers noticed a hole in the pocket of the robber's coat, and through the rent saw another pistol held in reserve. Needless to say, the one held in hand produced the desired result as he moved from person to person extracting their money with much expertness. When the final tally was made, it was disclosed that he had actually robbed 12 persons, and the total loot was between two and three hundred dollars. He had completely ignored jewelry and watches, but did take a woman's purse, which was used to hold his accumulation of illegally procured wealth. Little did he know at this time, but this purse was one of several clues that would eventually ensnare him in a web of evidence that resulted in his prosecution.

Entering one car, the vandal said: "I want currency. Folks, get your money quick. No time! No time! You folks stay where you are, my mate is up at the other end and I left my horse up on the road. I am a rancher here, never mind the jewelry, I want currency."

The reference to the horse injected the Dalton Gang influence into the case and the whole affair assumed the proportions of a Hollywood "flicker." Actually, the passengers described the bandit as possessing a mild, soft voice without a trace of distinguishing accent. They said that he was deeply tanned and was of gaunt, wiry build. He was about 5'6" tall, weighing about 135 pounds, and was thought to be about 40 years of age. He was also described as wearing a two piece suit of brown or grey, the pants being darker than the coat. The passengers said they would be able to identify the man if and when he was captured. There was also a consensus of opinion that the "baddie" had penetrating blue eyes, sunken cheekbones, a sharp thin nose and a smooth face. An opinion was expressed by some in regard to the removal of his mask. Some persons said that he evidently had a subconscious desire to be identified and punished.

Mr. H. E. Pierson, District Passenger Agent for the Southern Pacific, was also one of the robbery victims. Checking the quality of the railroad's passenger service, he soon came to the conclusion that these kind of things were certainly not conducive toward increasing Southern Pacific's passenger traffic. Mr. Pierson placed his business card in his currency hoping that the robber would overlook it, and that it might become a clue as to the identification of the bandit. This quick thinking was to pay dividends when the dragnet was finally formed.

Working his way toward the rear of the train, the nervous gunman came to a locked car door. W. S. Higgins, Southern Pacific employee from Stockton, California was credited by passengers in one car as having saved them from robbery. Higgins was on the train with his wife. Looking outside immediately after the crash, he saw a suspicious looking man running alongside the wrecked Limited, illuminated by the dim reflection of the car lights. Turning away from the window and back to the passengers he cried: "Hide your money and valuables. This is a train robbery." Higgins then had the porter lock the doors at each end of the car and the robber was unable to enter. Among those who profited by Higgins' quick action were Mr. J. W. Maynard, Stockton produce merchant and his wife, and Mrs. J. J. Hooper, wife of a Stockton street car official.

When the bandit found that he could not enter the car, he felt that time ceased to be his ally, and he dropped from the train and melted into the darkness from whence he came. Ironically, the rather small amount of money collected by the bandit was insignificant with respect to the many thousands of dollars that it eventually cost Southern Pacific in damages. His timing was perfect whether intended or not. He was swallowed by the silence of the autumn evening just a few minutes before the deputies raced to the scene. Things were happening fast. On the heels of the deputies came constables from Newhall and police from Central Station, Los Angeles. The alarm for the wrecker was urgently broadcast. After the law enforcement officers arrived on the scene, an intensive search was launched, and all motor roads in the area came under strict surveillance. Due to the fact that the area was so rugged and the night so dark, the search was ineffectual at best, and was called off until the next morning. Southern Pacific officials estimated that the railroad would be opened to traffic in five hours as crews from Los Angeles and Mojave labored to build a temporary "shoe-fly" around the disabled engine and cars. As promised by the bandit, the passengers were taken aboard the last five cars and hauled



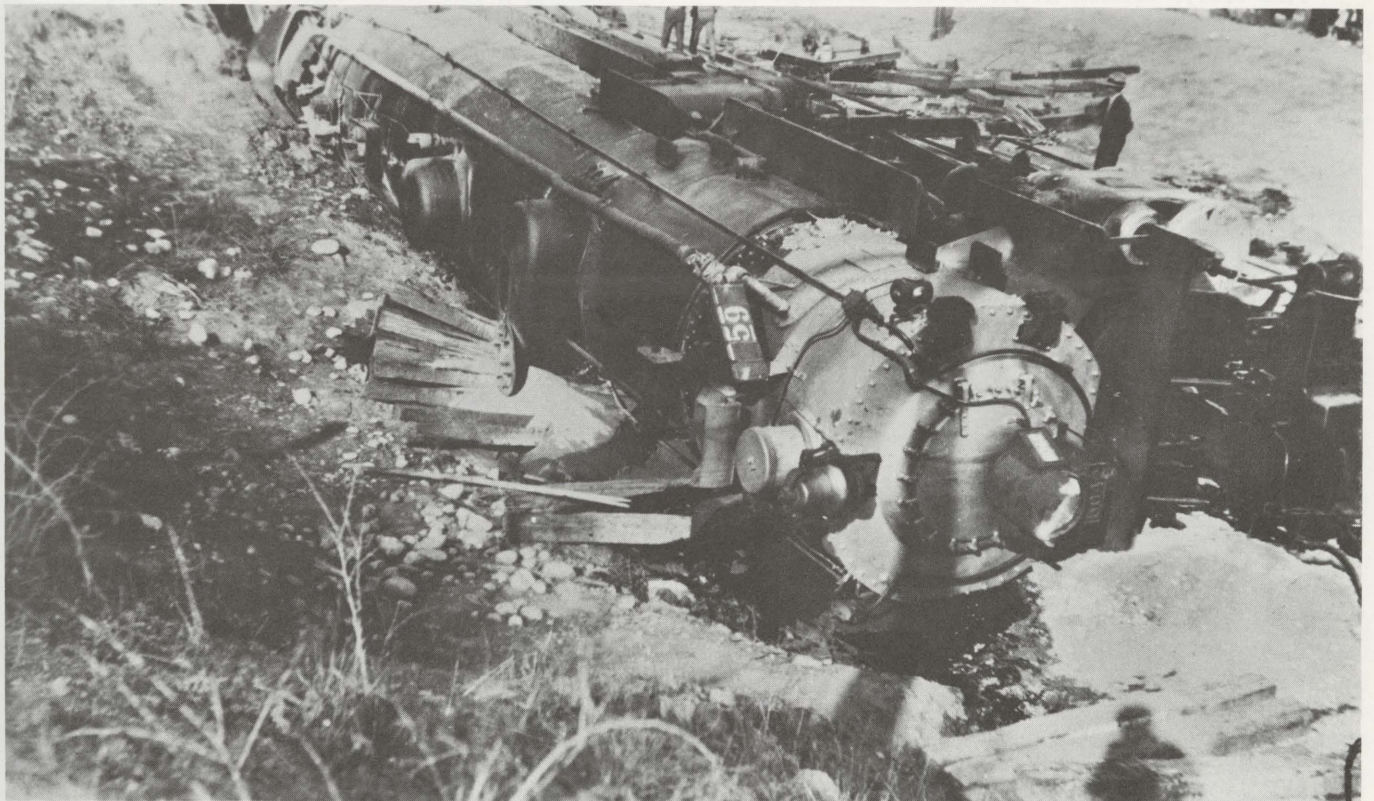


Train No. 59's three-cylinder locomotive is shown lying on its right side against embankment after being deliberately wrecked near Saugus, California on the night of November 10, 1929. Fireman Bob Fowler crossed from side of cab to big Vanderbilt tender and narrowly averted serious injury when he slipped off the rounded sides of the tank to the ground.

Courtesy Robert C. Fowler

View shows front end of **Southern Pacific Class** engine that was pulling train No. 59 near Saugus, California when it was wrecked and robbed by Tom Vernon. Notice mound of earth located just ahead of the 4-10-2's pilot which was ploughed up as the engine slid along on its side. Crude oil seeps into earth underneath locomotive from damaged tender in this photograph taken the day after the reckless crime, November 11, 1929.

Courtesy Robert C. Fowler.





to Burbank where they were dispatched to their destinations by way of the Coast Division. The estimated resumption in rail traffic was accurate, and trains negotiated the new track, by-passing the wreckage. Early Monday morning, November 11, 1929, the trains again ran on the San Joaquin Division. On Tuesday morning the following front page story appeared in the Los Angeles Times:

### MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

Railway men marvelled at the miraculous escape of members of the train crew and passengers as the heavy engine swerved from the loosened rails dragging the two cars with it while another left the rails. They state that the slow speed of the Limited approximately 25 miles an hour rounding the curves and pulling the grade in Mint Canyon was the one factor that prevented loss of life and many injuries.

Railway investigators and special men detailed from the sheriff's office after an extensive inquiry gave their combined versions of the wreck and holdup by describing the movements of the train and bandit.

According to the information disclosed, the authorities believe that the affair was carefully planned and carried out by a person familiar with railway construction work.

They believe that the man timed the speed of the Limited for several days prior to the actual wrecking.

This story, written in an obvious attempt to minimize the seriousness of the wreck, gave the engineer and fireman of No. 59 little comfort. Their injuries were all too painful and all too real. Continuing examination of the area disclosed that the tool house near the section shanty had been broken into, and the claw-bar and wrench obtained at about 6:00 P. M. just after darkness mantled the canyons and mountains of the district. The wrecking of the West Coast Limited was almost identical with an effort made the previous Thursday night near Santa Susana on the *Lark*, a San Francisco passenger train that traversed the beautiful California coastline. This attempt was foiled by an alert trackman who discovered the theft of some tools and then traced them to the scene of the wrecking attempt. Mike Smith, trackwalker, found the altered track and tightened the rails before the passage of the *Lark*. It was believed that another train had negotiated the weakened track prior to the time that Smith had found evidence of the train wrecking attempt. As in the wrecking of the West Coast Limited, a local tool house had been broken into, and the same

type tools were stolen and used in each case. This account of the wrecking attempt was widely circulated by local newspapers and confusion had evidently distorted the actual facts.

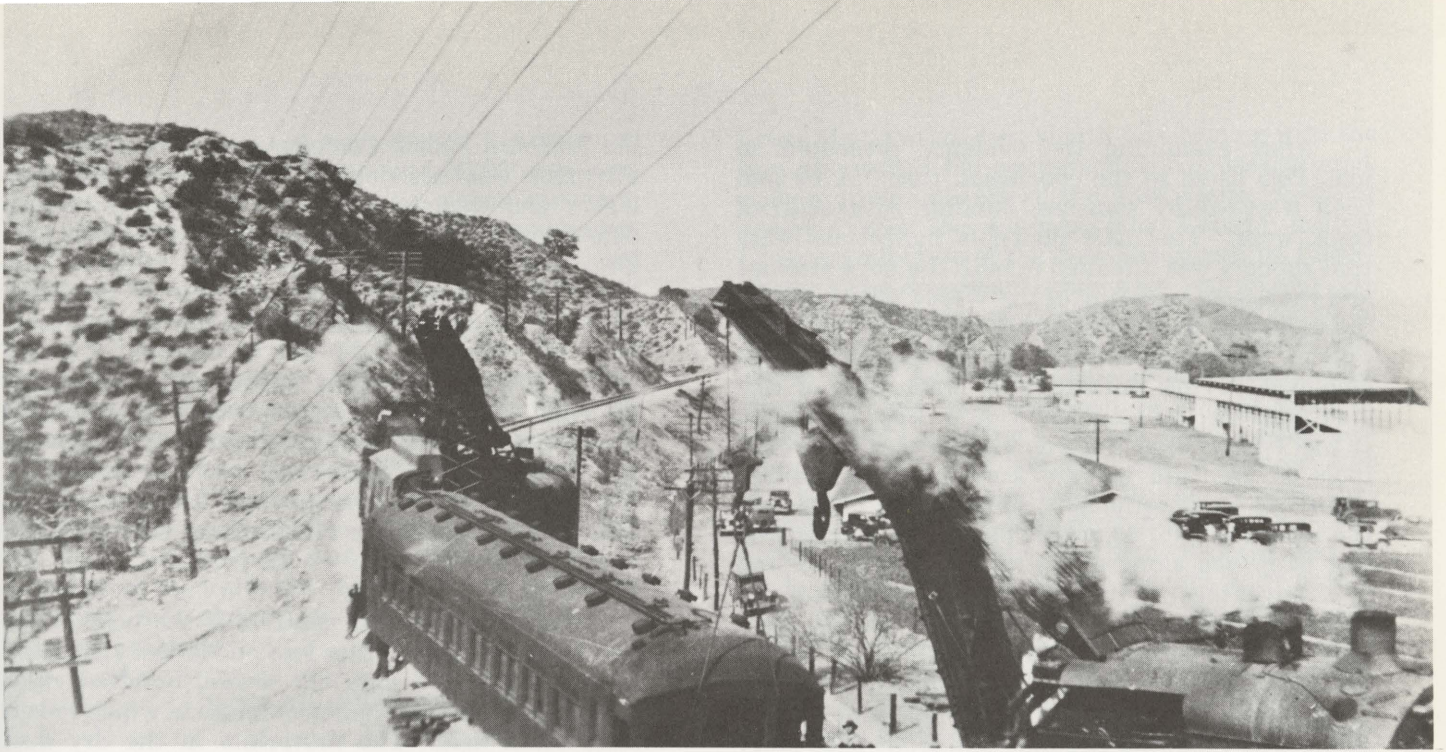
As if destined to become a victim of *some* train wrecker, Sam Zachery was nearly put in the ditch near Hasson station a few nights before the West Coast Limited incident. The facts were reported by Zachery who was an eye-witness to the earlier train wrecking attempt. "I don't remember dates too well, but I think it was two nights before this man wrecked the train at Saugus. I had been called with Engineer A. C. Ward up the Coast Division and we had a 2600 or 2700 series 2-8-0 consolidation engine with about 60 freight cars. We were running ahead of a passenger train (I don't remember the number of the train) and were meeting another train at Santa Susana. After passing the train at Santa Susana, it had time to go to Chatsworth against the passenger train. This same man who wrecked No. 59, as he admitted later, broke into the tool house at Hasson and took a spike puller and a wrench. He pulled all the spikes, took the bolts out of the angle bars which left the rail lying loose. The bonding wires remained connected to each end of the loosened rail providing continuity for the signal circuit. As we went over this rail which was loose, it shifted over and our flange hit the next stationary rail. We were told the flange of our locomotive marked the top of this rail for nearly 90 steps, then fell back onto the rail. Our locomotive broke the bond wire when we went over the spikeless rail and actuated a red block signal at both ends of the circuit. After we passed the train at Santa Susana, it had to be preceded by a flagman because of the restrictive signal indication. The alert brakeman found the loose rail and had it repaired so that his train could continue on to Chatsworth to meet the passenger train. Because of the fact that we were running ahead of the passenger train, it was no doubt spared the fate that turned the engine on No. 59 into the ditch." For some strange reason, Sam Zachery seemed to be in the wrong place at the right time, but his formal meeting with destiny was forestalled.

Dan O'Connell, Chief Special Agent for the Southern Pacific Company, arrived at Saugus and marshalled the members of the law agencies and then spread a dragnet over the entire area.\*

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*\*O'Connell had the reputation of being one of the most able railroad detectives in the country, as it was his untiring efforts that resulted in the capture of the De Autremont brothers. These cold-blooded murderers had stopped train No. 3 in the Siskiyou Mountains of Oregon on October*



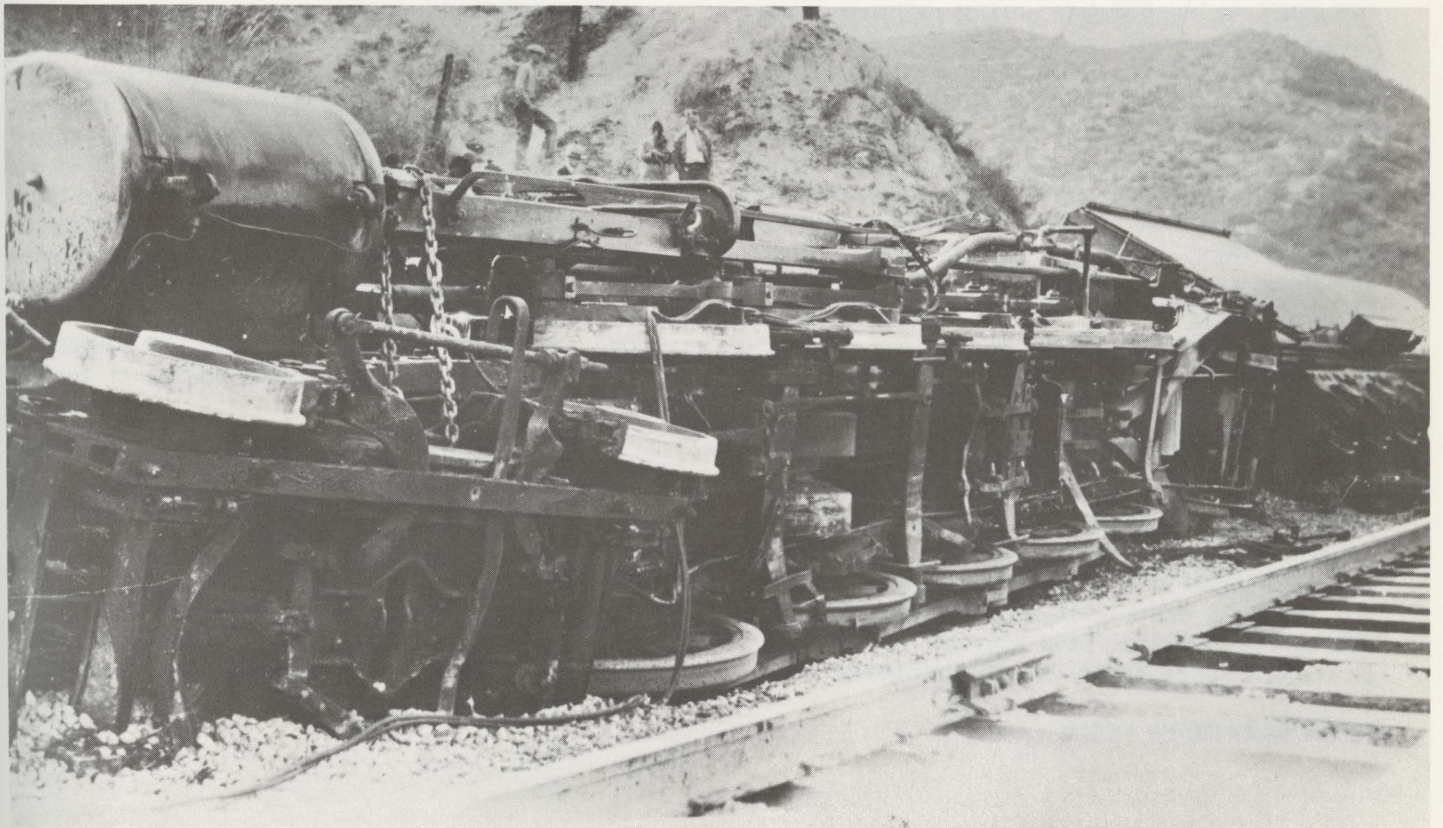


Derrick lifts smoker which was the second car behind 5042. Derailed locomotive traversed the high fill before turning over — a fortunate aspect of the tragedy. The casualty list would have been very large if the cars and engine had tumbled down the fill. View looks toward Saugus which is about 12 miles from Lang, California where the San Joaquin Valley line was completed from San Francisco to Los Angeles on September 5, 1876. The Baker Ranch and stadium (later the Bonelli Ranch) is in the right background. Photograph taken on November 12, 1929.

Courtesy Robert C. Fowler.

Underside of three-cylinder locomotive is dramatically shown in this “doing it the hard way” scene. The rarely seen counterweights of the center engine are shown at the center of the number 2 driver axle and the wheels and foundation brake rigging show evidence of great abrasion caused when the giant tore up the ballast before turning over. Track in foreground is a temporary “shoe-fly” built in an effort to return traffic to normal and for the eventual rescue of the big passenger engine.

Courtesy Sam Zachery.





After examining the evidence presented to him, Dan came to the conclusion that No. 59 had been wrecked by someone familiar with railroad track work. The most plausible indications were that robbery was intended in both the *Lark* attempt and the actual wrecking of the West Coast Limited. Some people were considering the theory that the crimes were perpetrated by a disgruntled ex-employee of the railroad with intentions of discrediting the railroad as a safe way to travel. It was evident that the wrecker knew exactly what tools to use, and he also knew where to obtain them. As an afterthought, some railroad men said the robber of No. 59 might have been a man who just happened along at the time of the wreck and took advantage of the confusion to carry out his hold-up. Police and sheriff's deputies did not agree with this theory and were certain this was a deliberate wrecking and robbery combined, and the some crime was indicated in the attempt on the *Lark*. The following headline and front page story appeared Monday evening in a Los Angeles newspaper:

**POSSES HUNT DESERT FOR  
TRAIN WRECKERS  
EXPERT TRAILERS TRACE FOOTPRINTS  
7 PERSONS NABBED BY POLICE ARE  
RELEASED FOLLOWING GRILLINGS**

An offer of a reward of \$5000.00 for the arrest and conviction of the wreckers and bandits made by

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*11, 1923. They shot Engineer Sid Bates and Fireman Marion Seng for no other reason than to eliminate the possibility of their identifying them as the robbers. The De Autremonts also killed a brakeman and the baggageman. The baggageman was blown to pieces when he refused to open the sliding door to the mad dog killers. This crime took place at Siskiyou, Oregon on the Old Shasta Route that ran through western Oregon by way of Ashland. After several years of painstaking work, O'Connell wrapped up the case, and the worldwide search was brought to a conclusion which resulted in their incarceration. One of the De Autremont brothers had sought anonymity by joining the United States Army, but this guise was uncovered and his true identity became known. Dan had also captured Roy Gardner, a notorious train robber, arresting him in a Roseville, California saloon. Gardner had robbed train No. 20 near Roseville and O'Connell took him single handed in a cardroom episode in which everyone lost their composure except the robber himself. He remonstrated O'Connell for sticking a "cannon" in his ribs and wisely demanded that the vibrating gun be removed immediately "lest it go off."*

THREE BARRELS OF STEAM

the Southern Pacific Company in San Francisco this afternoon was spurring on scores of ranchers, villagers and mountain men in addition to railroad detectives, sheriff's deputies and the like who were already seeking the bandits.

**HIRE EXPERT TRAILERS**

One posse of expert trailers and trackers led by Pete Le Mere, a veteran Indian hunter, were trying to follow the footprints which led away from the spot where the abandoned coat was picked up. The general belief however was that the bandits fled by motor car soon after getting their insignificant loot.

The all important coat, with the hole in the pocket and a three corner tear on its back, had been found on top of a high hill several hundred yards away from the Baker ranch stadium in which rodeos were often held. The footprints in the dry dust led the posse one-half mile from the train on a path leading directly to the State highway. The jacket had been discarded in hasty flight, and was found crumpled up in a clump of sagebrush. Two hundred yards down the trail the woman's purse was found, along with a business card from the passenger agent who had prudently inserted it in his currency.

The highway soon became the obvious point of escape. Jose Pablo told officers that two automobiles had been parked near the ranch during the day. Clues as to the direction of the bandits' flight came several hours later when a burly truck driver reported that he had seen two men in a Buick roadster hurriedly changing clothes on the Ridge Route. He stated that one of the men matched descriptions of the bandit. A wire was immediately sent to police at Bakersfield and to authorities along the mountain highway. The confusion born from the excitement gave rise to many conflicting stories by the frightened victims of the hold-up. Some of them said that the bandits had gone off together in a single machine. Others felt they had fled in two different automobiles. On Tuesday morning, November 12, 1929 the following headline story was published by the Los Angeles Times.

**RAIL BANDIT TRACED  
TRAIN WRECKER IN LOS ANGELES  
SAUGUS OUTRAGE BELIEVED WORK OF  
DEMENTED THRILL HUNTER  
POLICE REGARD ROBBERIES AS MERE  
AFTERTHOUGHT: ARREST NEAR**

Search for a lone bandit who wrecked the Southern Pacific West Coast Limited three miles



northeast of Saugus and then robbed a number of passengers of between \$200 and \$300 was concentrated here last night with an arrest imminent.

Railway detectives, sheriff's officers and police, and ranchers who joined in the intensive quest yesterday to apprehend the vandal responsible for loosening the rails and throwing the engine, baggage-car and smoker into the ditch believed their hunt near an end as the trail narrowed to a single man. Reports from Chief Criminal Deputy Sheriff Frank Dewar, assisted by Captain Brooks who is heading 50 deputies from the sheriff's office and Dan O'Connell, Chief Special Agent for the Railway who arrived on the scene at noon yesterday, indicate that the wreck and hold-up were the diabolical plan of a demented man affected by a mania for vandalism and that the robbery of the passengers was a secondary thought.

### REWARD OFFERED

Excellent descriptions of the wanted man and almost certain indications of his escaping from the wreckage scene in an automobile en route to Los Angeles were the basis for the assertion of the officers that daylight will see the end of the chase.

"We have traced the movements of the man from the wreck," Captain Brooks said, "and it will only be a matter of hours before he is in custody. The description of the suspect coincides in almost every detail with the man described by passengers on the train. We are also certain that he is demented," the officer declared. In explaining the belief that the bandit is of unsound mind, Brooks pointed out the conversation and actions of the robber while in the coaches relieving the passengers of only money, and his efforts to engage his victims in a friendly chat. The bandit, according to the officers, wore his mask in one car, removed it in another and then laughingly told the passengers that a relief train would arrive from Saugus in a very short time.

A reward of \$10,000 for the arrest and conviction of the man who wrecked the northbound train was posted by the Southern Pacific and United States Post Office Department. Half the amount offered by the railroad and half by the Federal Government.

Engineer Ball who remained at his post as the heavy locomotive ploughed its way over the ties and into the embankment only to be pinned in his cab and suffer from scalding steam was recovering at White Memorial Hospital yesterday. He was the only person injured among the many that were aboard the twelve coach train on its run to Portland and Seattle.

Many clues were being accumulated, and evi-

dence that the modern sleuth was coming into the fore abounded; his equipment encompassing such strange pre-requisites as the microscope, chemical analysis, and the all-important College degree. Close examination of the claw-bar turned up fingerprints. The important gray coat was closely examined and a pair of driving gloves was found in one pocket. Inside the gloves, the microscope disclosed metal dust and filings, such as might come from the hand of a workman in iron or steel, or very possibly a railroad section hand. They also found a white handkerchief and a leather key container, clearly indicating to the officers that everything had been discarded in great haste. The hole in the pocket and the three cornered tear on its back, probably caused by contact with barbed wire, was easily identified by the passengers, and gave the investigators positive proof that the coat was worn during the hold-up. Two deputies searching the narrow trail that led from the wreck scene to Saugus found the walk could be made in a mere 15 minutes. They completed the walk without finding any other clues except the purse and Mr. Pierson's business card.

On Wednesday the special agents of the railroad, and the detail from the office of Los Angeles County Sheriff Traeger, under the supervision of Captain Brooks, went into conference on the future course of the chase. It was readily admitted that the robber had cleverly covered his escape, and the search had to split into three directions. The investigators for the Southern Pacific expressed belief that the man sought was a former employee of the railroad at Saugus, who had been discharged several months earlier, and the entire force was proceeding on that premise. Captain Brooks said that his deputies had not only been given a full description of the bandit, but also his name and recent movements, and they would confine their search to the follow-up of clues uncovered late Monday night. As though grasping for straws, a theory was advanced that the man sought was an escaped inmate of the California State Narcotic Hospital at Spadra, California.

"We are sure that the man who wrecked the train was a former ranch employee," Captain Brooks said. "We have determined that the coat found near the wreck on Monday morning belonged to this man and that he was known to be slightly demented and that he suddenly disappeared. Just before the wreck the coat was missing from the bunk house at the ranch where it had been hanging and had been thrown away by the bandit." Conductor French had positively identified the coat as being worn by the desperado, and his close proximity to him during the commission of the crime made this clue extremely important.



Leads were coming in from every quarter. A clue to the identity of the robber was given by W. E. Bradford from Long Beach, California. Bradford told investigators that he overheard a conversation in the washroom at the Saugus railway station between two men who were discussing the best means of derailing a train. This occurred nine days prior to the derailment of train No. 59. "There were two men," Bradford was quoted as saying; "One of them weighed about 170 pounds, was about 34 years of age and was dressed in a worn blue suit. The other character was about five feet six inches tall, slender build, sandy hair and wore a gray sweater and gray coat. They were talking together about how they would pull out spikes, derail the train and then rob the passengers. I had nearly \$200 in gold in my pocket and I was going to give it to my wife for a birthday present, but I left as soon as I could, fearing they might hold me up."

The sheriff's deputies said the description of the second man tallied closely with the person picked up on the highway near the scene of the wreck. Captain Brooks said his men had investigated dozens of reports of mysterious cars parked near the Baker ranch, where the train was wrecked, and had combed the haunts of the moving picture cowboys in Hollywood. This "angle" was followed without producing any concrete results.

The ever present sensationalism of the case took on the proportions of Hollywood's favorite theme, the "horse opera," and this was proven by the following story published in the Los Angeles Evening Express dated Tuesday, November 12, 1929.

### **S. P. WRECKERS HUNTED IN AIR DESPERADOES WHO RIFLED TRAIN ARE BELIEVED IN VASQUEZ ROCKS**

An airplane search of the region in which are located the historic Vasquez Rocks — once the stronghold of the notorious train robber and stage coach bandit of that name, was to be made by sheriff's deputies in locating the man or men who Sunday night held up the West Coast Limited.

From a ranch near the fastness of great tumbled stones came word this morning that during two or three recent days two men had been observed transporting provisions over the most impassable mountain trail leading to Vasquez's stronghold.

### **IS NEAR SAUGUS**

The famous rocks are eight or ten miles from Saugus where the train was derailed. One or two armed men could almost defy an army if given the

protection of the great stones. Deputy sheriff Frank Dewar who was in charge at Saugus this morning decided to have his men fly over the region both for reasons of safety and because it would take days to search the area afoot. Mr. and Mrs. W. L. McCullum who live on a ranch near Lang, California midway between the scene of the train robbery and the Vasquez Rocks reported that for three days recent, two men, one of them answering the general description, had been engaged in packing something into the district. Each day the pair drove a loaded auto to a spot on a little used road in Soledad Canyon leaving it parked there for almost a day at a time indicating a long trek into the back country. They appeared to carry in provisions and came back empty handed.

A former Southern Pacific Co. employee believed to be mentally unbalanced was being sought in the vicinity of the line's Los Angeles yards and shop as the wrecker and robber of the West Coast Limited.

Imaginations were running rampant, and reports flooded the officers, only adding distraction to an already complicated case. The gray coat remained the most important clue, and was soon subjected to minute scrutiny. Laboratory examination turned up a blurred cleaner's mark in the lining of the coat that appeared partially legible. This sent the deputies combing the dry cleaning establishments of the county, but they came up with no information about the ownership of the coat. Another label was found on the coat which proved to be the No. 1 red-hot clue, because it advertised the fact that the jacket had been made by a Cincinnati, Ohio tailoring firm. With this information in hand, officers soon launched an intensive effort to learn the identity of the coat's owner. The legal snare was slowly being formed, and officers soon uncovered an amazing story of lies and intrigue.

Thomas Frith of Burbank was driving past the wreck scene with his wife and two daughters. They had been out for a drive on the desert east of Saugus and had stopped at the little mountain town for gasoline. As they waited for the attendant to hand pump the fluid up into the heavy glass bowl atop the metal pump stand, a rather anxious individual approached and tapped on the window of their car. The stranger said his little girl had been injured in the train wreck and had been taken to the hospital in Hollywood. He asked them to drive him there. Touched with compassion, Frith picked up the stranger and without going to visit the scene of the wreck, proceeded to Hollywood on his intended errand of mercy. Speeding southward, the Friths were soon confused by a barrage of



untruths and fabrications that made their heads swim. The stranger, evidently in a state of great confusion, changed his story several times in an apparent effort to appeal to the emotional nature of his considerate hosts.

The newly acquired passenger told Frith his name was Hall, and that he was a forest ranger on patrol when he came upon the wreck quite innocently. He first said that he had gone to Los Angeles to put his daughter on the West Coast Limited in care of the conductor. He then said that his little 11-year old girl got on the train by herself, and that the serious injuries she suffered in the derailment necessitated his immediate return to Hollywood. The lies were coming fast and furiously, and Hall told how he was riding his horse on the hill behind the scene of the wreck, and when he saw the wrecked train, he tried to ride his horse down to the railroad. He said that he was unable to make it down to the wreck and he lost his gun, badge, and finally had to take his coat off. He told of how the train was wrecked by a person who took the spikes from the rails and unbolted the angle bars that held them together. He also described the vivid scenes around the wrecked cars when the passengers were robbed. It seemed to the Friths that this character knew too much of the intimate details associated with the crime, and took note of the man's appearance. They later found that his description corresponded in many ways with that broadcast by the officers investigating the wreck and robbery. Frith said his mysterious guest wore a blue shirt and dark gray hat, had light blue eyes and was about five feet six inches tall.

Hall again laced his story with distortion, changing it by telling the Friths that his horse first sensed the wreck. According to Hall, the horse had "spooked," causing him to seek out the reason, which resulted in his locating the wrecked train. Overcome by the ghastly scene, and by the fact that his daughter was on the train, he left his coat and horse on the hillside, and hurried to the wreck in an effort to locate his daughter. Mr. Frith, who was employed in the motion picture industry, felt somewhat akin to the stranger because of his talented imagination. There seemed no doubt that this man possessed a talent that was complimentary to the "flickers." After a short period of interrogation, the stranger again gave the details of the robbery. He then reversed the trend and asked Frith if he knew any cowboys who were appearing in the movies. He informed Frith that he had worked with many of them in rodeos and stock shows, and that they were good friends of his. Hall inferred that he was a native of Wyoming and had worked his way west via shows at Yellowstone,

Pendleton, Oregon and several other cow-towns. He also mentioned that he had an operation for appendicitis and was sent to Santa Barbara and thence to Saugus. He never did divulge why he was sent to this part of the state or by whom.

Upon arrival at Hollywood Children's Hospital, Hall tendered the Frith family a \$5 bill as payment for the ride from Saugus. The Friths said they would remain outside the hospital until they learned of the little girl's condition. Hall then walked down the driveway, into the hospital, returning in about five minutes with his report about the girl. Hall stated that his daughter suffered fractures of both arms, but that her head was not crushed as he was led to believe. When asked where he lived, Hall said that his home was in Willowbrook near Compton, California. He said he would stay in Hollywood that night to be near his daughter, and obtained Frith's address which he scribbled on the back of an envelope.

The following day Frith hungrily read the details of the wreck and tried to correlate his personal experience with the newspaper stories. His suspicions were immediately aroused upon reading that the veteran engineer and fireman were the only persons injured in the wreck. It became readily apparent to Mr. Frith and his family that Hall and the train robber were one and the same person, and that he fitted published descriptions of the desperado in every detail. They had opened their hearts to a man who supposedly had a seriously injured daughter, only to find they had been innocently duped into aiding and abetting a criminal's escape.

The Burbank Police Department, after hearing about Frith's embarrassing experience, alerted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office. All points were informed by bulletins which were processed and distributed in an effort to apprehend and remove from circulation a mad man whose viciousness was exceeded only by his daring.

Following up on the robber's coat, evidence was developed indicating that it was made for a man named Armstrong who resided in Pocatello, Idaho, and had the coat finished in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was found upon further investigation that Mr. Armstrong was a respected and well-known resident of the community. Armstrong had sold the coat to a second-hand clothing dealer in May 1929, and it was later found that the cleaning marks were from a Pocatello cleaning firm. Hopes by law officers that Armstrong and Hall were the same individual were soon blasted when it was found that Armstrong was employed by the city of Pocatello, and that he was working on the date of the robbery. The second-hand clothing dealer was then interrogated and he said that he had



no record of the sale involving the suspect's coat. It must have been a great discouragement to investigating officers to be led up two blind alleys, but in the best traditions of their service they persisted in the case and their valiant efforts were soon to satisfy justice.

Closer analysis of the desperado's jacket revealed a rather accurate record of its owner. Hair on the coat was subjected to close scrutiny by laboratory experts of the Los Angeles Police Department, who came up with the following information: They deduced that the person who wore the coat was about 40 years of age, with light colored hair which was very dirty. The coat was worn in the proximity of cattle or other stock and probably belonged to a cowboy.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, the first real tangible evidence came to light right in the middle of an unsolvable paradox. A Los Angeles County deputy, who was assigned to the burglary detail, received a tip from attorney E. G. Hewitt who resided in Los Angeles. Hewitt informed Deputy T. J. Higgins that an ex-convict named Tom Vernon was probably responsible for the train wreck and robbery. Vernon, who was paroled from Folsom Prison in August 1929, had been acting as a caretaker at Mr. Hewitt's home. Hewitt ordered Vernon from his property when he found that the parolee had been leaving the residence at night equipped with the attorney's pistol. Vernon proudly displayed his native ingenuity by showing Hewitt a pair of rubber gloves from which he had cut the trigger finger. Before leaving his benefactor's home, Vernon stole some clothing and money, and also absconded with a revolver. The last act was no doubt motivated by a desire to insure an adequate income . . . lawful or mostly otherwise.

Enigmatic as it may seem, Deputy Higgins knew Tom Vernon well, having become acquainted with him because of his activities as an informer. A few years before, Vernon had been a prisoner in the Los Angeles County Jail, and his assistance had aborted an attempted break-out. At the time, Vernon was about 43 years old, and had spent 22 of those in various prisons, evidently becoming expert in committing felonies. His dexterity in this regard assured his repeated entry into the "big house." Vernon had been a six-time loser, and he had been imprisoned in the Pennsylvania and Ohio State prisons, graduating to California's San Quentin prison near fog-shrouded San Francisco Bay just after his western sojourn. The suspect had also served three terms on the rock pile at Folsom, located in the torrid foothills east of Sacramento, California.

As a result of his preliminary investigation,

Higgins obtained a photograph of Vernon, and with his partner approached the officers assigned to the case. The two deputies were put on the Saugus crime by Sheriff Traeger, and he encouraged them to prosecute to finalization. Mixing Vernon's picture with those of other known criminals, the two deputies took them to the Frith family for a show-down. Without any appreciable effort they picked Tom Vernon's photographs from the "mugs" and then positively identified him as the man they had befriended at the service station in Saugus the night of November 10, 1929.

There was no doubt about it. He was definitely the man who had ridden into Los Angeles with them, employing a ruthless guise that took the Friths on a merry-go-round of emotional frustration. Shaken by the experience, they were completely "wrung-out." It was soon established why Vernon was so conversant in matters "cow-wise" . . . when not in prison he worked as a stockman and rodeo performer, no doubt specializing in the legal derailment of genus Bovine!

Following this lead, the deputies took their portable "line-up" to the train crew, and also showed Vernon's photograph to the passengers of the ill-fated train. This proved to "nail" Vernon down as the train robber. Victim after victim identified him as the little desperado with the big "equalizer." Upon examination of further information gathered from informers, etc., Tom Vernon was placed in the Saugus area on the date of the crime.

About two weeks after the Saugus incident, a crack Union Pacific Railroad passenger train hit the ballast near Cheyenne, Wyoming. This wreck happened on November 23, 1929, and as if to fit a well-planned pattern, the passengers were robbed by a lone masked bandit fitting Vernon's basic description. Union Pacific's No. 17 was wrecked in almost the same manner as was the West Coast Limited, and the similarities of the crimes were amazing. Pressuring themselves to the limit, the law enforcement agencies realized it was extremely urgent that the maniac responsible for these depredations be taken out of circulation permanently. Maximum effort was now exerted in an attempt to capture Vernon before he diverted all of America's crack passenger trains to the ties!

A bizarre aspect of the case developed on about November 23, 1929 when Deputy Higgins, attorney Hewitt, and Hewitt's secretary, Miss Serrano, each received separate letters postmarked in Cheyenne. Vernon, in an apparent attempt to establish an alibi, wrote that he had left Los Angeles by motor truck on the morning of November 10, 1929. His anxieties were well supported,



because he knew he was facing a death penalty for train wrecking. He also knew that the web of evidence would soon encompass him, and terminate the heinous activities that he found himself occupied with. His alibi was emphasized in each individual letter and this was no doubt an obvious attempt to establish the fact that he was not in the Saugus area on November 10th.

On the day following the robbery of Union Pacific No. 17, a special session of the Grand Jury for the County of Los Angeles was convened. All information was presented, and the expected result was forthcoming. Tom Vernon was indicted and charged with train wrecking and robbery. His written alibi was soon disproved by locating several witnesses who testified that he had visited persons in Los Angeles on the night of November 10th. It was found that some time after leaving the Friths, he purchased flowers and took them to a Los Angeles hospital. Not for his imaginary daughter, the offering was intended for a lady friend, but the lateness of the hour required that he return the next morning. What manner of woman could motivate this man to commit such a crime? Now, it was positively established that Vernon was not only in the Los Angeles area on November 10th, but he was also there the next day. This blasted his patented cover-up into a million pieces.

The die was cast, and Deputy Higgins rushed to Denver, Colorado in an attempt to apprehend and arrest Vernon. Before going to Cheyenne, Higgins learned that the train wrecker had stayed at the Manx Hotel in the mile high city, and while the deputy interrogated the hotel staff, he came up with the "clincher." A chamber-maid produced a note Vernon had left for her which read: "House-maid, if I can ever help you, write me." As if devoid of all mentality, Vernon signed it "Buffalo Tom Vernon," and conveniently included his address as Pawnee, Oklahoma, in care of Pawnee Bill's Buffalo Ranch. The case was assuming proportions bordering on the ridiculous. But the results of Vernon's ruthlessness were less than amusing to his victims.

Joining forces with Sheriff Romsa of Cheyenne and Special Agent Matt McCourt of the Union Pacific Railroad, Higgins rushed to Pawnee, Oklahoma in an effort to find Vernon. Find him they did on December 1, 1929, and together with Sheriff Alan Jones of Pawnee County, arrested him on the warrant issued for him on the California train wrecking charge. The next day produced the fruitful results for which Higgins had worked so hard. Tom Vernon confessed that he had wrecked Southern Pacific's No. 59 and had also robbed its passengers. But they weren't going to pin the Union

Pacific "rap" on him. He denied all responsibility or that he took any part in the U.P. robbery, and was very adamant in that regard. The sheriff from Cheyenne, along with the Union Pacific's Special Agent, felt that Vernon was lying and knew they had a very strong case against him. In view of the facts and clues they had, they promptly filed a request with the Governor of Oklahoma for Vernon's extradition to Wyoming.

On December 4, 1929, the Los Angeles County Grand Jury returned another indictment, charging Vernon with the Saugus train wreck and four counts of robbery. On that same day, Governor Young of California signed extradition papers which were forwarded by air mail to the Governor of Oklahoma.

A legal tug-of-war seemed to develop as Wyoming officers asked for Vernon's return because they felt they also had a conviction assured. Deputy Higgins wired California Attorney General Webb, requesting all possible assistance in having Vernon returned to California for prosecution. Webb telegraphed the Attorney General of Oklahoma, assuring him of a positive conviction in view of Vernon's confession. Los Angeles County District Attorney Buron Fitts was notified that a hearing was to be convened in the Governor's office at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on December 7, 1929. Buron Fitts chartered an airplane on December 6th and arrived in time for the important hearing.

The meeting was attended by an imposing array of personalities which included Oklahoma's Governor William J. Holloway and his Attorney Baxter Taylor. Also in attendance were County Attorney Pickett of Cheyenne, Wyoming, Special Agent McCourt of the Union Pacific Railroad, Sheriff Romsa of Cheyenne, District Attorney Fitts and Deputy Higgins from Los Angeles County. All facts and related data concerning the Saugus robbery were outlined. Fitts presented the evidence, which was reaching massive proportions by now, and capped it off with Vernon's confession. He had evidently influenced Sheriff Jones of Pawnee, Oklahoma, because when Jones testified, he stated that he arrested Vernon for the California authorities. He stated that they assumed prior rights to the robber. The Wyoming authorities knew they had been pre-empted, and considering Vernon's confession of the West Coast Limited robbery, felt their case was slipping away from them. Vernon had clung to his original denial of any complicity in the Union Pacific train wrecking in Wyoming.

Governor Holloway concluded the lengthy hearing and his decision called for Deputy Higgins to return Vernon to California for prosecution. Higgins returned the robbery suspect to Los



Angeles by train, arriving on December 9, 1929. Vernon was then put through the "ringer" by Southern Pacific's Chief O'Connell and Captain Brooks of Los Angeles County. After a round of thorough questioning, Vernon made his second complete confession, and was then returned to the scene of the crime. He was asked to show where he tampered with the rails and pointed out the exact spot. Vernon had also showed the officers where he waited in ambush and watched the head-end of the train turn over. His sadistic nature caused him to brag about his attempt to wreck the Owl, but that train luckily negotiated the unspiked rails without incident.

While other legalities of the case were being settled, Higgins followed up on the important coat identified as being worn by Vernon. The indefatigable deputy found that the coat was part of a suit issued to Vernon on his release from Folsom prison in August of 1929. The coat had been purchased from a second-hand clothing dealer in Pocatello, Idaho by a fellow inmate who identified it. It had been added to the prison wardrobe pool, and then issued to Tom Vernon upon his release from the institution. Thus, the deputy's thoroughness helped forge another link in a steel chain of evidence that was designed to permanently restrain a mad-dog train robber.

On December 12, 1929, Tom Vernon appeared before Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Aggeler, and entered a plea of guilty to train wrecking and one count of robbery. He pled not guilty to three additional counts of robbery, and was represented by a Public Defender named Davis. Davis wisely ordered a psychiatric examination of his client because of his prison record, which carried a notation signed by a doctor. It read: syphilitic-cured. Davis felt he could base his defense on the premise that Vernon was insane, and the court promptly appointed three doctors to check Vernon's sanity. On December 17, 1929 the doctors adjudged Vernon sane and mentally responsible for his acts under the meaning of the law. Subsequently Attorney John Cooper acted as counsel for Tom Vernon, but his efforts came to naught. It was widely rumored that the Indian scout, rancher and showman, Major G. W. Lillie, had engaged Cooper in Vernon's defense. Vernon had worked for the old gentleman at one time, and Major Lillie evidently felt that he had to finance the criminal defense for old-time sake.

The police were hindered by a myriad of confessions, and one such admission of guilt was volunteered by Lester Mead. Mead showed up at Los Angeles Police Headquarters just after the Saugus depredation and confessed that he was responsible for the wreck and robbery of the West

Coast Limited. Primarily, it was Mead's ability to read the newspapers, and his contact with sensation seeking news reporters that allowed him to acquire many facts relative to this crime. However, when taken to Saugus to reconstruct the crime, he failed miserably. He was taken to the point where 5042 had hit the ground, and he didn't even know what direction to go to find the tool house. His story was "shot full of holes," and his confession was incomplete and fabricated with far too many discrepancies. His reference to time and distances proved that his sole purpose was to gain false notoriety regardless of the consequences. He was far from the mark and this fact eliminated him as a suspect.

The officers checked his past and found that he and his brother had been inmates of an insane asylum in Washington State. He resumed his residency in a mental institution soon after his confession was completely disproved. Mead had basked in the limelight of publicity, reveling in a joyous psychoneurotic dream world that happily included the real, startling blue-white dazzling flash of photographer's bulbs and the eventual front page news release of sensational impact.

As if to challenge Mead for his position of priority on the front pages of the tabloids, Vernon claimed to be the son of James and "Cattle Kate" Averill, who ended their career while dancing grotesquely at the end of a rope for rustling cattle in Wyoming. Vernon's erratic story, and his idiotic conduct during the commission of the crime, would lead one to think that perhaps he should have been committed to a medical facility. Be that as it may, Vernon's association with cattle and horses should have ended in the rodeo arena. Little did he suspect that during the glamorous heyday of the cowboy shows he would be destined to become the victim of a much wilder horse . . . one of ferrous structure. Southern Pacific's 5042 was the last bronco Tom Vernon would bust and he came out second best for his involvement in this senseless crime.

Time was fast running out for Vernon. On December 18, 1929, sentence was pronounced on the train wrecker by Judge Aggeler. Vernon faced the austere Judge, and took a lifetime sentence without hope of parole. The convicted robber didn't even "bat an eye," and the train wrecker appeared to be standing in an emotional vacuum. Vernon, like so many of his bovine victims, had reached the end of his rope. The State and Federal laws called for execution on the train wrecking charge, and this is exactly what District Attorney Fitts pressed for. However, Vernon was sentenced to Folsom prison for life under provisions of the California Habitual Criminal Act and also five years to life



on the robbery charge. He was escorted to Folsom prison, then processed for a life of confinement. The dreary rock quarries of this maximum security installation must have seemed like home to him, and he was certified to his former assignment as a hoist engineer. Considering the many times he was imprisoned, his make-up must have included a hidden desire to be in the "lock-up" at all times. Was the loneliness of the "outside" a driving force that caused Vernon to seek the companionship and security of penal confines? He seemed to be most happy in Folsom, and the officials considered him an excellent prisoner even though he had written several letters claiming that he had been framed.

Nevertheless, Tom Vernon served about 35 years in prison for the Saugus "caper." He was released on parole about 1964. A short time after his parole, Governor Edmund G. Brown gave Vernon his final pardon. Though a writ of Habeas Corpus was presented in Vernon's behalf on May 1947, its denial by the California Supreme Court was to eventually be nullified by the final pardon extended to the old, graying prisoner.

The author would suggest that the *Southern Pacific Class 5000* steam engines had reason, other than technical, to produce their stuttering exhausts. Considering the weird experiences that were visited upon their herd, little more reason need be cited to explain their strange stack mutterings.

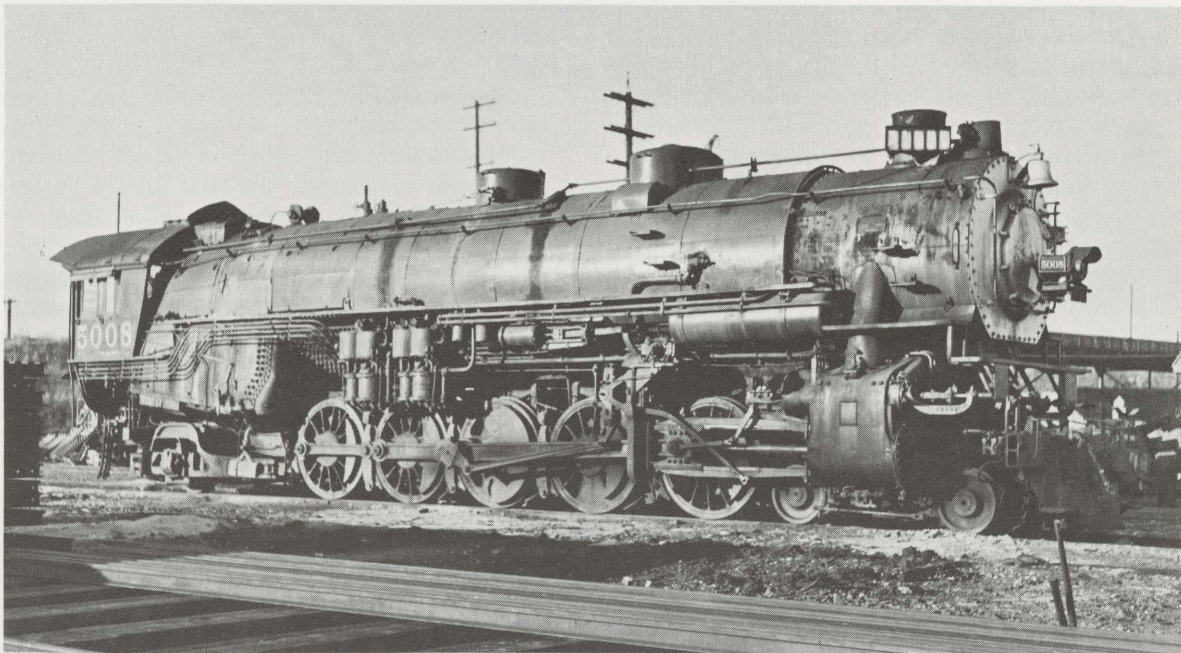
Although Buffalo Tom Vernon was to spend a majority of his life confined behind prison bars, the three-cylinder giants enjoyed the unrestricted expanse of the desolate west, and continued to chuckle away the endless miles. Vernon's imprisonment in no way eased the inherent fear that the huge 4-10-2's became imbued with. Allowing consideration for past experiences, they were to forever continue their stammering talk without criticism. However, their fears were misdirected.

Like all other locomotives powered by steam, the *Southern Pacific* and the *Overland Class* engines were to someday make the final run. Their ultimate demise was finally occasioned by the encroachment of colorfully enameled legions of gaudy "skunks." Provocative as the word PROGRESS may seem in this regard, the Diesel revolution on America's railroads eventually brought superannuation to the steamers. PROGRESS forced the three-cylinder beauties from the high steel to the unwarranted imposition of the dreary locomotive graveyards.

Occasional releases to alleviate seasonal shortages only served to temporarily forestall the inevitable switching movement down the rusty rails to the junkers.

As ashes and dust so return . . . so did the 4-10-2's return to the searing flames of the open hearth furnaces from whence they came.

*Born of Flame . . . They Lived of Fire . . .  
And So They Died . . .*



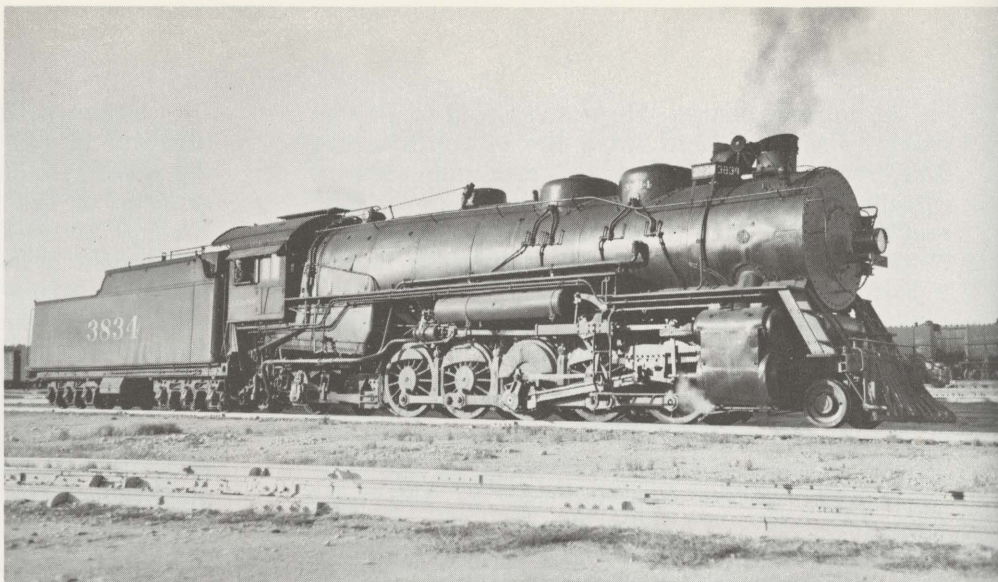
Lonely and temporarily deserted, the retired SP-1 waits for the biting cut of the scrapper's torch. Photograph taken at Portland, Oregon, July 1954.

Larry Harrison collection.



The lost engine of Woodford, California is shown here after her complete rebuilding and subsequent return to service on the Tehachapi Pass railroad. Jerry Best caught her about eight months after the disaster on a sunny afternoon at Bakersfield, California. Looking much like she did when built, the expert rebuilding by the shop crew at San Bernardino, California left no visible evidence of the terrific damages sustained by her fall into Tehachapi Creek. Photograph taken April 9, 1933.

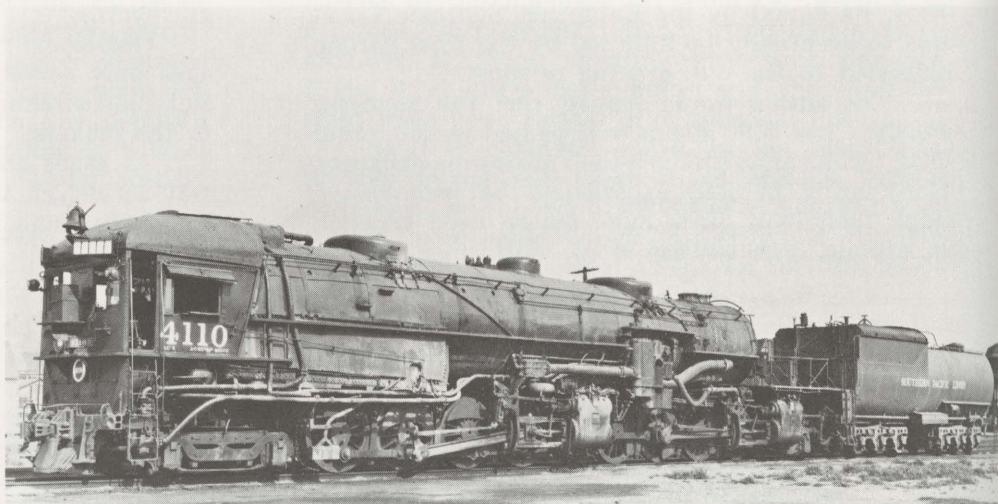
Gerald M. Best photograph.



This was the point engine that powered the Southern Pacific train stalled at Woodford, California during the terrific cloudburst of September 1932. The huge "back-up" Mallie is shown in later years at Los Angeles, California, photographed on March 9, 1946, seven years prior to her scrapping. The placement of the cab was possible only because these engines burned oil fuel. Crude oil in their tenders was kept under slight pressure so that it would flow the length of the long boiler and be available at the burner in full volume.

F. C. Smith photograph.

Guy L. Dunscomb collection.



This AC-5 engine was the second helper cut into second section of No. 818 just 13 cars ahead of the caboose. The big cab-ahead 4-8-8-2 and her sister engine 4110 were untouched by the flood disaster that coursed down the 18 mile Tehachapi Canyon on September 30, 1932. The cab forward design was necessitated by the use of these locomotives in long tunnels and snow sheds. By placing the cab ahead, engine crews were positioned ahead of the stack and were spared the discomfort of breathing hot exhaust gasses and steam. All Southern Pacific 4-8-8-2's were built by Baldwin Locomotive Works between 1928 and 1944. Photograph taken at Los Angeles, California on September 18, 1938.

Allan Youell photograph.