The T&OC Wreck Train - 1968

by James M. Cavanaugh

Mention a train wreck around railroaders and you start a discussion that will run for hours. Or maybe even days, with some interruptions to do a little work. Everybody would get in on it, enginemen, trainmen, yard clerks, car men, right-of-way men, van drivers, hostlers, suit-and-tie management, and the roundhouse janitor. They would tune up with reminiscences like: "There was that time up at Dunkirk…" or "Yeah, but back in '47 just above the diamond at Galatea…" or "That time the mine run hit the north switch at…." They would get into theories about what caused wrecks, how right-of-way maintenance was not what it used to be, or how trains ride better behind the diesels that they did with steam. Then it got personal, how Rufus Wright made five straight days on double overtime on a wreck train in '65 or how Arnold Jones was headed to his retirement party at the roundhouse when they ran down the Marysville Turn at Scottslawn. The subject seemed inexhaustible, and as usual everybody was sort of an expert and had some good stories. A wreck discussion would draw out the quietest man and eventually have him in animated conversation.

Wrecks are bad, but they are part of railroading. When they happen, everybody, regardless of his or her regular duties has one job -- get the line open again right away. It was surprising how quickly the whole team came together, almost without discussion, and began moving resources toward the task of getting the railroad back in operation.

The first reports would come in from a tower operator, after the unfortunate train's conductor reported it from the wayside phone box nearest to the site. Sometimes it was an adventure to get to that phone, maybe a long walk in the rain, or a ride in the county sheriff's car, or a call from a farmhouse. The maintenance supervisor and trainmaster would drive out as close to the wreck as they could, or maybe grab a track car at a right-of-way shed and get down to the location to assess the situation.

The dispatcher would shut down the line, holding up trains at West Columbus, Stanley Yard, Corning, Hobson, Dickinson and various division points and yards, or tuck them into our long passing tracks, to keep the main open to enable wreck equipment to reach the site. Must-run trains would sometimes be diverted onto the C&O that paralleled our line both north and south of Columbus. The ripple effect upstream would reach faraway New York Central RR points like Selkirk Yard near Albany, Collinwood in Cleveland or Elkhart up by Chicago, where the Columbus Division would immediately start re-routing traffic to keep the Western Branch of the T&OC from clogging up and coming to a standstill. Even when things were moving like clockwork on the T&OC, open yard tracks and sidings were at a premium, and they would quickly fill to gridlocked overflow if the main track either north or south of Columbus went out if service.

Whatever the location or cause, the first mobilization step was to get the T&OC's wreck train moving toward the place in question. Our wreck train sat on the southernmost track in West Columbus Yard, at the east end near the yard office. Most of the wrecker was old but routine-looking rolling stock, mainly a half-dozen old NYC gondolas, a boxcar and a couple flat cars. The wreck special also sported a handful of ancient Pullmans and baggage cars, now painted bright yellow but with rust blooms showing through at the rivet lines. Lastly, the most eye-focusing element was the Bucyrus 100-ton steam railway crane, riding on a pair of two-axle trucks on a short frame with its enormous boom pointing west, hovering over a short "idler", a gondola-type car on regular two-axle trucks. A casual observer would assume this was an assemblage of retired junk waiting for a trip to the scrap yard. But the wrecker was an old tough-as-nails fighting train, ready to surge into action on a few minutes' notice.

The wreck train was loaded up with everything the crew would need at the site of a derailment, including dozens of rails, joint bars, buckets of spikes, nuts & bolts, piles of wooden ties and several pre-assembled short sections of track. The latter items had rails already spiked to the ties, ready to be lifted into place by the crane where needed. Inside the baggage car reposed every sort of gear and tools the wrecker crew would need to pull locomotives and cars from the ditch and get them rolling on the rails again, and equipment the section gang would need to get the main track passable as soon as possible. Most prominently, the gondolas carried a goodly

supply of four-wheel trucks. Replacement trucks would be needed for a fair percentage of the ditched cars at the scene.

The wrecker's gear also included sets of incredibly bright lights on portable steel tripods, and cabling to connect them to a generator. Within minutes of arriving at a nighttime wreck site, the crew would have it lit up like Broad & High Streets, ready to work round the clock.

The Pullmans included bunks and living quarters for the wrecker crew, consisting of the old upper and lower berths, and a dining car arrangement with a cooking galley and long crew table for meals. The train stocked an enormous quantity of hearty food - not exactly four-star cuisine, but good energy-restoring meat and potatoes grub, pretty tasty and lots of it. I remember especially a huge 10-gallon pot in which they had boiling kielbasa sausage, potatoes and cabbage, one of the most satisfying meals to which I ever sat, coming in from wet cold outside.

Crew seemed to work 12-16 hours on with a few hours off to catch some shuteye and a bit to eat and a coffee. While traditionally they lived out at the site, by the 1960s the more common practice seemed to be to put the men up at a nearby motel. The T&OC had deals with a number of these lower-price but pretty decent places all the way from Toledo to Swiss, West Virginia. The one we often got was at New Lexington, which seemed to be a half hour from most of the middle reaches of the South End of the T&OC between Columbus and Hobson on the Ohio River.

The railroad would get their crew vans as close as possible to the wreck, either along a muddy maintenance access road next to the tracks, or on the nearest farm road, which might require men to hop a couple barbed-wire fences. But this way they could get lots of men to and from the site rapidly without the need to back engines and trains down to the nearest yard or passing track. That would take hours, while the vans could move people on and off site in a few minutes.

Every wreck is unique, depending on the location and geography. The only common theme is they seldom happen along a nice straight stretch of track. The usual site is at a diamond (where another railroad crossed ours) or switch, likely on curving track, the typical cause being a broken rail, faulty switch or human error.

The wreckmaster, the man in charge of operations at the scene, would organize his approach based the location and layout of the nearest turnouts and sidings where the locomotive could run around cars. This was essential in order to switch out the wreck train before proceeding the last few miles, to get the big hook in first position to do the heavy lifting. Typically they would want the idler car just behind the crane, with spare trucks available for re-railing the rolling stock.

A wreck scene could be anything from a string of cars and engines standing upright on the right-of-way to everything over on its side or in a jumbled mess 25 feet down an embankment on both sides of the track. Strangely, at the few wrecks I attended,

it seemed the locomotives stayed upright near the track, while the cars went every which way. I went to one good-looking wreck up at the wye at Berwick where a really heavy ore train downbound on the Eastern Branch came up on the interchange track switch, and found it half-open, likely tampered with by some local teenagers. The 10,000 tons of taconite shoved the four covered wagon F9s all the way out to the Big Four main, with about ten hoppers jackknifed in behind them. This wreck would be pretty easy to clear as it was on flat ground right next to a wide road. In contrast, I also was sent out to a mess south of Corning, where a dozen mixed freight cars were all the way down in the creek bed off the right-of-way, a mile from the nearest good road.

The first substantive task would be to move the derailed cars off the right-of-way and get the track back in shape to start re-railing things. Likely by the time the wreck train arrived, the crew on the head end of the train involved in the wreck, if their engine was not itself derailed, would have uncoupled all cars still on the rails and taken them off to the original destination. If there were cars on the rear end behind the wreck still on the rails, the nearest local engine crew on that side of the obstruction (such as the pair of GP-9 mine run locomotives over at Claybank or Kenton yard job SW-7) might have been dispatched to pull them back to some point where they could be put in a side track in the clear. But in a bad location the wreck train engine might have to get the part of the wrecked train still on the rails out of the way to get up to the scene on our single-track railroad.

To move damaged cars, the big steam hook, with its 100-tons of lifting or pulling power, would get up over one end of the car, with her ponderous bridle and boom pendants pulling the goose-necked boom high above its normal "at rest" horizontal position (which had to be low enough to clear overhead bridges while riding on the line). The crews would put huge chains and cables around the car, and move the crane's hook into position above. This was not easy. The main hook block with four courses of big wire cable running through probably weighed more than 500 pounds. The men used ropes and pry bars to move these big objects around. The process was slow and tedious, as the highly-geared wrecker crane two-cylinder steam engine cranked, working the gears and shafts to the cable spindles. The boiler hissed and moaned, and the little cylinders exhausted steam out sideways in a series of little "phfffft-phfffft-phfffft" bursts.

Sometimes damage to the track underneath the wreck was slight, others the whole right of way might be torn up into a tangled mess. The crew would be on top of this as each car was lifted out of the way, cutting metal with flaming torches, undoing or tightening joint bar bolts, driving spikes. The big hook might put the less-damaged cars back on the rails to be hauled off. In what seemed like no time at all, the track itself would be back in service, albeit still in rough condition.

The next round of work was pulling the remaining wrecked cars back up the embankment, getting them upright on all fours and starting to get them back on wheels and rolling on the rail crowns again. Most people are surprised to learn that

the trucks and wheels beneath rail cars are not fastened on. They sit on lubricated weight-bearing pivots, essentially held in place by a big steel spindle and pure gravity. When the momentum of the wreck puts a greater force momentarily on them all kinds of weird things happen, but in most instances the cars come loose from their undercarriage and wheels. The cars might be integrally undamaged, pointing every direction, but their wheels and trucks would probably be in an awful mess of tangled brake rods, loose axles and wheels underneath the entire pile. Some of the trucks would be unusable, and thus the spares brought out to the scene by the wreck train.

The wreck train crew was like any other under the Ohio full crew law - engineer and fireman on the head end, and a train crew with a conductor, head brakeman and flagman. The wrecking crew seemed to have 15-20 men out on the ground. The wreckers were road maintenance and car men, seemingly all 55 and older, in dusty gray coveralls, gloves and hats, mostly looking thin as rails, slow moving but tireless.

The wages for working the wreck train were fantastic, or so it seemed to me. On a regular freight train run, you made a fixed amount depending on the length of the run in miles, regardless of how long it actually took to make the trip, and then went on time-and-a-half overtime after that time expired, and you could work up to 16 hours. On the wreck train you went on time-and-a-half overtime after eight hours, then after 16 hours you made continuous double overtime for the rest of the period you were out there. I later was told, wreck train workers were exempt from hours of service rules and did not "violate" after 16 hours like regular train crews.

Arriving at the Scene

The wreck train always seemed to draw one of the T&OC's well-maintained GP-9s. We would be given priority to move from the West Columbus roundhouse to the wreck track, and get right out of the yard after our air test. Short but heavy, the wreck train put some strain on the locomotive to keep up the allowed track speed for this equipment of 25-30 miles per hour.

As the wreck train approached the site, we would stop and switch out our train at last siding or run-around point, to get the big hook and her idler car on the front end just ahead of the locomotive. To do this, we needed a siding or industrial track with a switch at either end, as we could not 'drop' the crane or other dilapidated old heavy cars or 80-ton Pullmans. We also had to check the employee timetable as the heavy crane was not allowed in everywhere. Under the timetable rules, the crane boom had to face backward while running, if possible. So at this point the operator would fire up the boiler, get up steam and turn the crane on its axis to point forward toward the wreck. Once set up with the train equipment in the preferred order, we would push the train to the wreck site at a slow crawl, maybe 10-12 miles per hour until we got within sight of the area, then 5 MPH for the last stretch.

Once there, part of the wreck crew deployed the lights and got the diesel generator set working.

On the Job - the Big Hook

The key to pulling the wreck apart was our brawny steam crane, with her 35-foot gooseneck boom, a pair of I-bars with a three-foot steel web, and the ponderous main 100-ton capacity hook with four turns of one-inch greased steel compound pulley cable, and a smaller ball-weighted hook at the tip of the boom with a single topping lift cable. Both the 100-ton hook and the tip hook were painted yellow. Once in place, the crane operator deployed four extension stabilizer legs out to the side, giving the machine a solid tip-resistant footing. The operator seemed to be sandwiched into a very uncomfortable confining hot cab amidst gears and moving cables. With her little tweeting whistle occasionally chirping, and crackling "chit-chit-chit" bursts of cylinder exhaust, and belching black coal or oil fire smoke, smelling of sulfur, the big Bucyrus went to work.

After the track at the site was patched up, to the extent it needed reconstruction, the crane operator would set about pulling up one car at a time and getting it on the rails to be hauled out of the way. The crane would drag the car bodies up onto the right of way, just parallel to the track, then reach back and pull trucks up to put on the rails, and then it would re-grab the car and put it on the trucks, one end at a time, with the wreck crew moving the trucks back and forth a bit using long pry bars. The result was a rickety-looking mess with no working brakes. Car men with blazing torches worked on each car, cutting away dragging brake linkages and debris. The torches were very dramatic at night, flashing surges of light that momentarily would overpower the huge banks of portable incandescent light. The one wreck scene I recall most vividly was a dark foggy night; when the torch would emit a burst of light it would bounce off the moisture droplets of the fog producing a "whiteout" effect so you could not see anything even ten feet away, then when the torch powered down the scene framed by the ends of boxcars sticking up out of the ditch with ghostly grey figures of men moving everywhere would re-appear.

The activity at the scene was accompanied by a din of steady industrial noise from the generator set, the diesel locomotive powering up and down to make small movements on the track, the clang of steel on steel pounding and the little steam engine of the crane giving out staccato beats of exhaust. While there was a lot of waiting around for the train crew, this was the polar opposite of the usual railroad experience. The worst tedium out on the road, at least for me, was standing out on the right-of-way at a siding in the middle of a steamy night, in dead silence except for the crickets and mosquitos, waiting for the train we were to meet there, waiting and waiting sometimes for hours, for the first hint that train had finally made it, the initial sign being the faint horn blow at a distant grade crossing, or glimmer of the headlight crawling over a hill ahead. On the wreck job, there was always something to see in front of you, even if hours were passing.

Once the track was repaired, we would have to take single cars or small cuts of rolling stock away from the scene to the nearest place where we could get them off the main track. This was a time-consuming process, but done in a way that did not impede work on the rest of the wreck. The idea here was to bring a second locomotive up from the direction opposite the one now blocked by the wreck train itself. As cars were put back on the rails one by one, the wreck train would push them down the track a short distance away from the wreck site. Some of these cars had no brakes (air or hand) and if it was on a grade men would block them in place with chunks of scrap wood, or whatever else was available, under the wheels. The second engine would get hold of the far end and roll the cut slowly to an industrial track or other turnout a couple miles away. Possibly after some additional emergency road repairs in place, these cars would later be collected to go to a bad order track somewhere in Columbus to await major overhaul.

The re-railed cars usually had at minimum working couplers and drawbars at both ends, and sometimes had air lines working through end-to-end, just with the brake reservoir and pistons cut out. This was necessary because the equipment of the undercarriage was badly damaged with no working chains and rods connecting the piston and levers to the brake shoes on the trucks. I recall once having to ride the front of one of these cuts for several miles. The conductor and I clung to the ladders on the side of a hopper car, manning a brake hose extension line. This was a 15-foot two-inch diameter hose with a coupling that locked onto the brake hose at the front end of the car, and with a big hook and hand valve at the other end so the trainman could open the air line to set whatever brakes there were in an emergency. This cute little rig also had an annoying air whistle you could activate by pushing a button on the side of the metal valve housing. The conductor, Denver Rollins, who had a good sense of humor, had fun blowing this chirpy whistle at road crossings, with our standard crossing "tweeeeet-tweeeet-twe-tweeeet". That way, he said, we were "perfectly legal" under Ohio law. That running joke aside, this was not fun. Hanging on the ladder got unpleasant after a very few minutes, and it was cold and windy. It took forever to get down to the elevator track where we were to leave these cars.

Worse still, if you had a car with no working coupler at the front end, your only option might be to try to drag it to a siding with the locomotive using a big chain or cable, or you could tie onto it with the big hook of the steam crane and pull the whole wreck train along with it several miles up the track to the siding. Of course, if that car broke free on a grade it would be a dangerous problem. The wrecker crew seemed to have the ability to replace a whole drawbar out at the scene to avoid this, but if the entire draft gear assembly had been destroyed in the wreck this might not be possible except in a shop. In some cases the only sensible thing was just to abandon a badly wrecked car in place alongside the railroad, leaving it for a scrap dealer to come with his torch and cut her up.

Meanwhile back at the wreck the work went on. Returning to the scene with the locomotive after dropping off some of the wrecked cars, it was amazing how much

they had accomplished in so short a time. While each step of each task seemed to take an interminable amount of time, when you have a crew of experts each doing his job methodically and continuously, night and day, it all comes together.

Eventually the process would come to a point where the main track would be open for resumption of traffic, even though there were more cars to be re-railed. At this point periodically during the day we might have to pull the wreck train up to a grain elevator track and get in the clear to have NT-7 or the Peabody train crawl by. The wreck site might still have a five or ten miles per hour slow order posted. But these revenue trains had to get through. After a couple trains passed, we would back the wrecker out of the elevator track and inch down to the site to resume work.

Heading Home

Finally, when the last derailed car was back on the rails and hauled off, it was time to go home. The wreck crew got their tools, scraps of rails, ties and bolts, the lights and everything else back on board the train or dragged it off toward the utility trucks up on the nearby road. They would use the last of the steam in the crane boiler to swing the boom around to point aft.

I recall heading north from the above-mentioned wreck near Corning. We coupled everything up, and with two toots of the horn, pulled for Columbus. On the way, we stopped at a siding up the line to pick up some of our wrecked cars that had by now been repaired enough to make the run back to the yard. We managed to get a long-platform NYC caboose on the back end of the whole outfit, with working air all the way back. With this clunky assemblage of junk in tow, some of the cars with damaged trucks, brakes and bearings, we could not get a good roll on, so the GP-9 was laboring a little to keep up 20 miles per hour.

But by now it was a beautiful late summer afternoon, and the wreck crew decided to unwind by riding on top of the cars to take in the scenery. Our engineer, Kenny Scherer, thought we better put a stop to that before we came to any point where NYC brass might see it. Riding atop equipment is notably prohibited by the rules in both the timetable and the safety manual, and we reasoned the engineer could "catch heck" for not preventing it. He went out on the running boards on the side of our GP-9 on a curve and waved to the men to get down, but they just waved back. Finally he stopped and walked back, and said he hoped they had enjoyed it, but Thurston was coming up and somebody might see it and "write us all up." No problem, Mr. Scherer was a very authoritative guy, and an engineer's word goes out there on the road, so all went back inside the Pullmans.

Back at Columbus, we came to waiting green home signals at Bannon, South Columbus, Broad Street and the B&O. I thought we would roll into the wrecker track with this mess. But it was just like any other arriving train and we were assigned an inbound track, then cut the locomotive off and took her to the roundhouse. The train, including the bad order cars and the wrecker equipment,

would be switched out in the usual manner by the yard crews with their pairs of little SW-7 goats. Once off duty, heading for our cars, everyone noted pleasantly how our paychecks for the month would be heavy from all the overtime.

[*Written from memories from 47 years ago - corrections and additions welcome. I recall the crane being a Bucyrus, but one friend with whom I discussed this said he thought it was a Marion model, or maybe a Bucyrus-Erie or a Bay City. Maybe someone who reads this might recall*.]

Here is a link to videos of a working railway steam wrecking crane. Note one of these the side panels have been removed so you can see the steam engine operating,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZddfTjqSHw

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVulbtPnfyk

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFx-q7amNfs

An interesting side note - in New York City and also in the Cleveland Union Terminal, they used double ended wreckers, self propelled, designed for tunnel work. A derailment in a tunnel must be a real challenge! The big PRR double-ender had 450 HP gas engine, and reportedly could run up to 30 MPH. She also could carry a huge battery on the back hook for tunnel work where you could not operate the internal combustion engine.

http://members.trainweb.com/bedt/indloco/amtk16000.html#Self

https://books.google.com/books?id=-z8_AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA1101&lpg=PA1101&dq=rail+wreck+crane+battery&source=bl&ots=ytynClC_K2&sig=2Nf5722g8GyZ6X9T9Scyt1XnE1g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB4Q6AEwA2oVChMIkvzz_qepyAIVAgo-Ch0HvAI9#v=onepage&q=rail%20wreck%20crane%20battery&f=false