

Way We Were  
May 16, 2018  
Off the rails  
David Nicholas, researcher

The term “off the rails” barely needs an explanation. The phrase makes it clear that a calamity has occurred – the only question remaining is how bad the situation may be. Today we will investigate an “off the rails” incident in Park City that happened on March 9, 1964.

Fay Dearden, Union Pacific Railroad station agent for Park City waved goodbye as the “local” began its seventy mile return to Ogden, Utah. Fay exemplified the professionalism associated with the Union Pacific. He knew well the challenges of running a railroad, especially during winter in the Wasatch Mountains.

As the two GP-9 engines and one caboose rumbled away, Fay glanced at his watch – it was 3:00 pm – and returned to the warmth of the station. The winter of 1963-64 had been brutally cold with temperatures averaging 20 degrees Fahrenheit below normal along the Wasatch. In February, only one day exceeded 32 degrees, with twelve nights below zero. March continued the frigid trend with evening temperatures below zero and daytime highs below freezing. Sunday, March 8 delivered heavy snow that persisted into Monday, creating havoc for drivers and disrupting rail operations.

Fay was concerned about the braking systems on the engines. Deep snow and extreme cold was known to induce brake line malfunction. Despite speed restrictions in town, without brakes, the GP-9 engines – weighing 130 tons each – could experience trouble quickly, especially considering the ruling grade leaving town. He would not be able to relax until he received the routine phone call confirming the crew’s return to Ogden, expected in about two hours.

Putting worries aside Fay sat down at his desk to complete the day’s paperwork. He looked forward to the return of his three children from school and his wife Donna from job as branch manager at the First Security Bank.

Deep in thought Fay was surprised when his office phone rang. He was further startled when he heard the engineer’s voice say, “The train is off the rails, nobody’s hurt.” In the ensuing conversation Fay learned that the brakes had indeed failed as the train was turning around in the wye at the northern edge of town. The train was upright but stranded. It would need to be re-railed. Fay said he would make the required phone calls and be right there.

First he called the Road Master’s office in Ogden. The Road Master was responsible for marshalling men, equipment and materials to re-rail trains and repair damaged track. Subsequent calls were made to section crews from Echo, Coalville and Park City.

Next Fay called Donna explaining that there’d been a wreck, the crew was safe, he was heading over to crash site and that it would be a long night. Dressed in his warmest gear Fay drove the short distance to the switchyard just across from the City Cemetery, near today’s Blind Dog and Boneyard restaurants.

Come back next week to learn about men and machines battling the weather to re-rail the Park City local.



Image ID: Not in collection

Credit: Photo courtesy Marian Dearden McGuire

Caption: Fay Dearden, center, served as Union Pacific Station Agent in Park City for twenty years.