

Way We Were
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Back on Track
David Nicholas, researcher

Welcome back to our story about the March 9, 1964 derailment of the Park City local. We left off with Fay Dearden, Union Pacific Railroad station agent for Park City driving from the station to the accident scene at the switchyard on the northern edge of town. Through a series of phone calls Fay had already set in motion the forces necessary to re-rail the train.

Arriving at the yard Fay surveyed the situation: the lead engine had broken through a barricade at the stub-end of the wye, traveling approximately thirty-five feet before stopping just short of what is today Kearns Boulevard. The two engines and caboose remained upright. In the world of derailments this incident was minor.

Frigid temperatures and snow had contributed to the accident. The lead engine's brakes had failed. The braking capability of the second engine was insufficient to curtail the 130-ton lead locomotive's wanderlust. The frozen switch at the north end of the wye also contributed.

Section crews arrived and prepared the site for the arrival of the wreck train from Ogden, expected around 8pm. The trailing engine and caboose were decoupled from the lead unit and moved away to allow room for the "Big Hook" on the wreck train to lift and re-rail the errant engine.

Mobilizing a wreck train is not a trivial task. The entire set of railroad vehicles on a wreck train typically includes one engine, a steam derrick (also known as the "Big Hook"), a tender for the derrick with two flat cars on either side, a sleeper or dormitory car, a commissary car and caboose. A wreck train must have everything necessary to re-rail a train and repair damaged cars and track. The train also provides sustenance for the crew for as many days as the salvage operation takes. Once assembled and ready, the train master had to clear the busy main line from Ogden to Echo, giving the wreck train priority. At Echo the special train would switch to Park City branch.

For spectators, the wreck train's arrival was a sight to behold. Battling freezing temperatures and blowing snow, UP crews hunkered down to the task at hand. Flood lights turned night into day. The Big Hook was positioned to lift the engine and place it back on the track. By 4am on Tuesday, March 10 the mission was accomplished. Miraculously the locomotive was none the worse for its misadventure. Once moved and attended to, the crews repaired the damaged track and frozen switch. The wreck train returned to Ogden a little after 6am. The Park City local was ready to continue its interrupted journey by 7am.

Fay Dearden returned home exhausted and proud: another "command performance" by the dedicated workers of the UPRR. As Fay drifted off for a quick nap he had no way of knowing that lightning would strike twice. But that's a story for another day.

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Caption: The big hook, a crucial part of any wreck train consist called out to deal with train derailments, is used to lift and place train cars back on their tracks, as shown here, ca.1957.