

Way We Were
July 4, 2018
Runaway train
David Nicholas, Researcher

The term “runaway train” conjures up thoughts of panic, as well it should. When we hear it, we know something has gone terribly wrong. Fortunately an unmanned train hurtling out of control is rare.

Railroad accidents happen. The majority are minor and rarely reported beyond local news coverage unless there is loss of life. Causes almost always include a combination of mechanical malfunction, human error and weather. On Friday April 26, 1968 these factors would conspire together to initiate a nightmare scenario for the Park City Local. Let’s find out what happened.

Fay Deaden, Union Pacific Railroad Station Agent for Park City was up before 5:30am. The day promised to be busy. First he attended to the four coal stoves in the station: two upstairs; one in the office; and one in the utility room. Donna, Fay’s wife (and manager of the First Security Bank) would soon rouse their daughter for school (the couple’s two older sons were away at college). Fay wanted a warm reception for his family.

Upon completion of his morning domestic responsibilities Fay ensconced himself in his comfortable office. A hectic day beckoned both Fay and the crew of the Park City local, though no one could foresee the crazy scene that awaited.

The winter of 1967-68 would not relinquish its grip. The previous two weeks in particular had witnessed heavy snow and unseasonably cold temperatures. For the Park City Ski Resort, owned and operated by United Park City Mines (UPCM), the enduring winter weather was good for the ski business - the season had been extended an additional two weeks to Sunday, April 28.

But even as UPCM enjoyed the benefits of their business diversification strategy, they remained first and foremost a mining company and for that core business, the previous six months had been difficult.

Labor unrest at the smelters in Salt Lake culminated in a strike. The ripple effect impacted Park City. The closure of the smelters effectively closed the mines. Over 180 men were furloughed. Ore was stockpiled locally, but this option was limited.

After intense negotiations the strike was settled. Miners returned to work. The Union Pacific was tasked with transporting the backlog of ore to the smelters. On Friday, April 26 life in Park City was good, except for the weather. The mines were open and the ski season was coming to a successful close.

The sound of air horns heralded the arrival of the “Local” as the train traversed several unprotected grade crossings. These two engines (road units number 148 and 191) and the caboose (UP 25579) had served the town faithfully since the Union Pacific dieselized the Park City branch in 1956.

No one could contemplate that before the end of the day the Park City Local would become a "runaway train." Please return next week for the continuation of our story.

For this series of articles, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of the Dearden family, Steve Leatham, and Harry Price, retired Union Pacific engineer.



Image ID: digi.54.2

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Marian Dearden McGuire Collection

Caption: On Friday, April 26, 1968 "Dependable Transportation" proved elusive for the Union Pacific Park City local train.