

Fewer Trains Keep Drivers Off Guard

By TOM OPPEL
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(First of two parts)

The morning after five members of the same family were killed at an unguarded railroad crossing in Charlestown earlier this month, many questioned where else in New Hampshire such a tragedy could occur and what was being done to avoid it.

But if the questions received no ready answer, the reason may be related to why the problem exists at all.

Between 1967 and August of 1978 — the last date for which such informa-

tion is available — 189 New Hampshire motorists were involved in railroad crossing accidents, resulting in seven deaths.

At least part of the problem of grade crossing safety for New Hampshire's motorists, several state law enforcement and safety officials say, may be related to the small volume of train traffic now traversing the state's 1,534 grade crossings.

That low volume leads to a lack of concern or even awareness about grade crossings on the part of many of the state's drivers, those officials say.

But it is also true that of the state's 953 public grade crossings, a 1976 survey found some 400 crossings in need of "major" safety improvements, according to John Hickey, a utilities engineer for the state Department of Public Works and Highways.

And a program designed to upgrade those crossings is running into difficulties in keeping pace with the need. By 1982, the then-six-year-old program is scheduled to have completed work on less than 100 of those crossings most in need.



Rail-Street Problem Area

Stop signs on either side, along with the traditional rail warning crossbucks, are the only traffic controls at the Boston and Maine Rail-

road's tracks on Nashua's Charron Avenue. The stop signs were posted after a train-truck accident a number of years ago. (Telegraph photo-Dillaby)

TRAINS

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LAST 2 DAYS
Millers
Corner of W. Pearl & Main
WOMEN'S SHOE SALE
\$10 - \$15 - \$20
orig. \$18-\$50
More Famous Names!
Extra space on our
2nd FLOOR

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Fewer Trains and Accidents----

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Detailed information on locations and contributing factors on accidents involving trains and motor vehicles is only available for 1976, 1977 and the first eight months of last year. During that 32-month period 47 such accidents occurred, resulting in injury to 24 people and one death.

The information, obtained from the state Department of Safety, also shows that the contributing factor reported in 36 of those 47 accidents was listed as some form of driver error, such as inattention, failure to yield the right-of-way, disregarding signals or excessive speed.

"People get out of the habit" of stopping at crossings and checking for trains when there are numerous crossings "where you never see a train in a lifetime," says Merrimack Police Chief John Pelletier, chairman of the New Hampshire Police Chiefs Association's Traffic Safety Committee.

With nearly 100 grade crossings in 10 South-Central New Hampshire communities, accidents between trains and motor

vehicles have been relatively low in the 32 months for which accident location data are available.

Traffic on the three main lines, however, is also fairly light. Three times a week, a train makes the roundtrip between Nashua and Bennington, nine roundtrips per week are made there or through Nashua and Manchester and five days a week a train makes the roundtrip between Manchester and Lawrence, Mass.

Six accidents, resulting in two injuries, were recorded in the nine towns and Nashua on those three main lines between January, 1976 and August, 1978.

Londonderry and Salem — on the Manchester-Lawrence Branch of the Boston and Maine line — experienced two accidents each in 1976 and 1977, while Nashua and Lyndeborough — both on the B&M's Hillsborough Branch — had one accident each in that period.

Other areas have not been so fortunate. Charlestown, the scene of the tragic collision between a truck and an Amtrak passenger train resulting in the death of five members of one family, experienced five train-

motor vehicle accidents in 1977. The North Country city of Berlin has been the locale for seven recent accidents — three in 1976 and two each in 1977 and 1978, prompting at least one state official to suggest the next major tragedy may occur there.

Between January 1976 and August 1978, Manchester was the scene for five such accidents, while four took place in Jefferson and three occurred in Lancaster.

Jefferson was also the location of the last fatal accident between a train and a motor vehicle — prior to the Charlestown incident — in August 1977. Prior to that, one fatal accident had occurred in 1971, three in 1970 and two in 1967.

At the same time, the statistics compiled by the Department of Safety show no specific pattern to the numbers of accidents.

While eight such incidents took place in the first eight months of last year, 1977 saw 26 such accidents. Before that, 1970 was the last year in which more than 19 train-motor vehicle accidents were reported.

The figures are relatively low when compared with other types of motor vehicle accidents. That, too, may be related

to the volume of train traffic.

On the horizon, however, is a major increase in the amount of rail traffic due to the efforts of Gov. Hugh Gallen's administration to have a resumption of commuter rail service between Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Pointing to the recent demonstration run of a new commuter train which may have signalled future restoration of commuter train service between New Hampshire and Massachusetts, Chief Pelletier says increased train traffic is inevitable because of the energy situation.

However, given the present attitude of the motorist, Pelletier fears that without a new driver education program emphasizing railroad grade crossing safety, accidents between trains and motor vehicles may increase.

Gallen aide Peter Goelz, who is handling the effort to renew train service, notes that discussions about resuming rail service have stressed the need for concurrent funding to upgrade the crossings along the Concord-to-Nashua route those trains might take.

At the same time, while admitting it had not been discussed, Goelz noted that some increased effort in the area of public education about grade crossing safety should also be considered.

And Major George Iverson, head of the State Police's Traffic Bureau, also admits that, with the prospects for increasing rail transportation in the state, safety officials "will have to have a new emphasis on grade crossings."

"I think this last fatality woke people up, at least for a short time," Pelletier offers. "Now we should try and keep them awake."