

This **copy** is for personal, non-commercial use. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution you can: 1) Use the "**Reprint**" button found on the top and bottom of every article, 2) Visit reprints.theygsgroup.com/dailyherald.asp for samples and additional information or 3) **Order a reprint of this article now.**

Article updated: 12/30/2013 5:19 AM

2013 sees spike in train vs. car, pedestrian collisions

By Marni Pyke

With his headphones on and music blaring, the young man never saw the Union Pacific Railroad freight train.

But engineer Harry Stewart had a few excruciating seconds to watch the collision unfold in front of him without being able to stop it.

"He stepped across the first rail and I thought, 'this man's really taking a chance,'" Stewart recalled. "Then he stepped across the second rail. Two more steps, he'd have been in the clear, then he started going in the same direction we were going."

Stewart applied the brakes but to no avail. "I heard the thump of his body," he remembered.

The crash was in Texas. But across Illinois, similar tragedies unfold regularly, changing the lives of the victims' families and the train crews who witness them.

Just before Christmas, three separate train vs. pedestrian or car collisions occurred on Dec. 20 in the suburbs. And, the data from January 2013 through September shows a surge in crashes compared to the same time in 2012.

There were 85 collisions at railway/road crossings in Illinois in the first nine months of 2013, a 9.5 percent increase from 76 in 2012, according to the Illinois Commerce Commission. Collisions not at crossings from January through September 2013 came to 39, a 27 percent increase from 25 in 2012.

The lion's share, or 56 percent, took place in the Chicago metropolitan region — one of the busiest areas in the world for freight and commuter lines.

"People just take trains for granted. It's part of the landscape," Stewart said, adding that nonchalance can be deadly. "To look at a train from a distance, it doesn't appear to be moving as fast as it is."

Despite police ticketing blitzes and programs like Operation Lifesaver that educate the public about the dangers of ignoring lowered gates and warning bells, there were 36 train collision deaths from January through September this year in Illinois.

In the aftermath of that fatal collision in Texas, Stewart kept telling police and railroad managers to look for the young man. "I'm fine," he insisted.

"I didn't realize tears were running down my face. Finally, they got me to sit in a chair and they took my blood pressure ... I was about to stroke out," he said.

Stewart went home but couldn't bring himself to tell his wife what happened. He received some solace from a fellow engineer who called him and said, "never put a question mark where God has put a period."

Stewart is now UP's manager of employee support services and leads a peer counseling group that helps train crews experiencing similar traumas.

He draws from 31 years as an engineer where he witnessed one close call he can't forget. It took place near an industrial park with several companies including a beer distributor, a paper producer who transported huge rolls of paper and a compressed flammable gas manufacturer.

As the UP train neared a crossing, he watched a semitrailer truck drive onto the tracks and realized disaster was imminent.

"It unfolds mentally in slow motion," Stewart said. "At first, you get mad. You think 'What is this person doing?' Then, you frantically blow the horn. At a certain point you know — regardless of what you do — it would take a miracle not to hit them. When you apply the brakes at 60 mph, it takes quite a while for a train to stop."

Stewart remembered thinking, "if it's a beer distributor truck it should be OK. If it's a paper truck, it may not be OK because those rolls of paper have the capability of crushing the front of the cab. If it's compressed flammable gas ... it would not be OK."

The conductor hit the floor to shield himself from the impact. Stewart turned his chair so he could continue blowing the horn and control the train up to the last second.

Then, "I dived on the floor as we went through the center of the trailer. The only thing that saved the driver was that we were going at a speed sufficient to cut the trailer in half."

After the crash, Stewart rushed over to the truck cab where the driver sat holding the steering wheel clenched in his hand "in a death grip. First I said, 'Are you OK?' Then I said, 'Didn't you see us coming?'" The driver had been oblivious. "He had no idea we were within 100 miles."

I'll report back on an entire year's worth of train collision statistics next year when the data's available. And, here's Stewart's advice for a safe finish to 2013:

"During the holiday season, we live two steps ahead of where we are," he said during an interview last week.

"We're thinking about where we're going, what we have to do or what we forgot rather than what we're doing presently. Remember, your cargo is precious ... I'm referring to the lives of human beings."

Your voice

George Thoren of Grayslake asks "why now?" when it comes to plans to extend Route 53 into Lake County.

"I arrived in Illinois on a brisk October day in 1982," Thoren wrote. "Broke, tired, just divorced, no work available in my chosen field: counseling for patients identified as chemically dependent. Thirty-one years have gone by. I had lived in five different states, many towns, cities and had traveled a LOT. But I asked the locals why, why did Route 53 just STOP. For no apparent reason. Nobody knew. Theories were abundant; most of them tied to politicians. Why now? Why bother?"

Got a comment or question? Drop me an email at mpyke@dailyherald.com or follow me on Twitter at twitter.com/DHInTransit.