

# Thirty-Eight Lives Lost When Cloudburst Damages Bridge

Olympian derailed near Saugus, Mont.—Most serious accident of its kind since 1923

THE greatest loss of life in a railway accident in the United States since 1923 occurred on June 19, when at least 33 passengers and 5 employees were drowned and 43 persons were injured as the 11-car Olympian, a Chicago-Seattle train of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific plunged through a single-track bridge into Custer Creek, east of Saugus, Mont., soon after midnight. The accident resulted from an unprecedented cloudburst which fell several miles north of the bridge and rushed down the creek to undermine its piers. It occurred without warning and in spite of safeguards, in an isolated area where the nearest telephone is a mile away and where there are no highways. There had been rain east of Terry, Mont., 12 miles east of Saugus, but there was no indication of high water when the train crossed the Yellowstone river a short distance east. Also, a track walker, who passed over the bridge a short time before the accident, reported that the stream was nearly dry at that time.

The accident occurred when the train was on the bridge. The locomotive, the mail and the baggage cars and one coach continued beyond the west bank, while the other coach and a tourist sleeping car came to rest on the edge of the water. The two other tourist sleeping cars which followed were completely submerged in the water, one remaining upright and the other landing on its side. The remaining cars of the train, a diner, two Pullman sleeping cars and an observation car, remained on the rails leading to the bridge, and no Pullman passenger on the train was killed.

The casualties occurred only in the derailed cars, the largest number being in the tourist sleeping cars. Because of the conditions under which the wreck occurred, it has been difficult to determine the exact number of persons killed. The body of a woman thought to be one of the passengers was found in the Yellowstone river at Glendive, 50 miles away, while four other bodies were reported to have been picked up in this river 26 miles from the accident. According to an estimate made by the conductor, 152 persons were on the train. Of these, 67 passengers continued westward on the same day or the next, while 43 persons, 6 injured seriously, were taken to hospitals. Of the remaining 40 persons estimated as on board, 38 are dead and 2 unaccounted for.

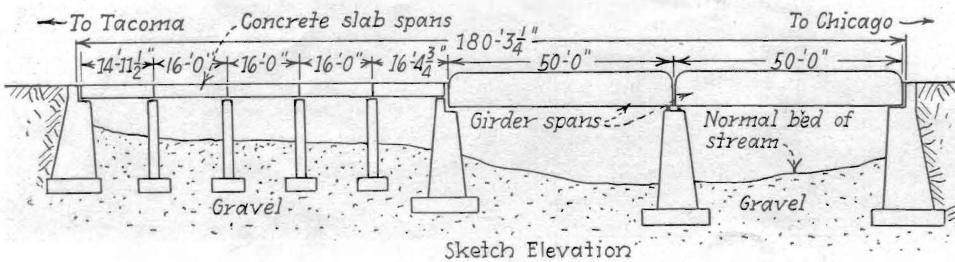
This derailment mars the safety record of the Mil-

waukee, on which road no passenger has lost his life in twenty years, and that of the railroads as a whole which have not had so serious an accident since September, 1923.

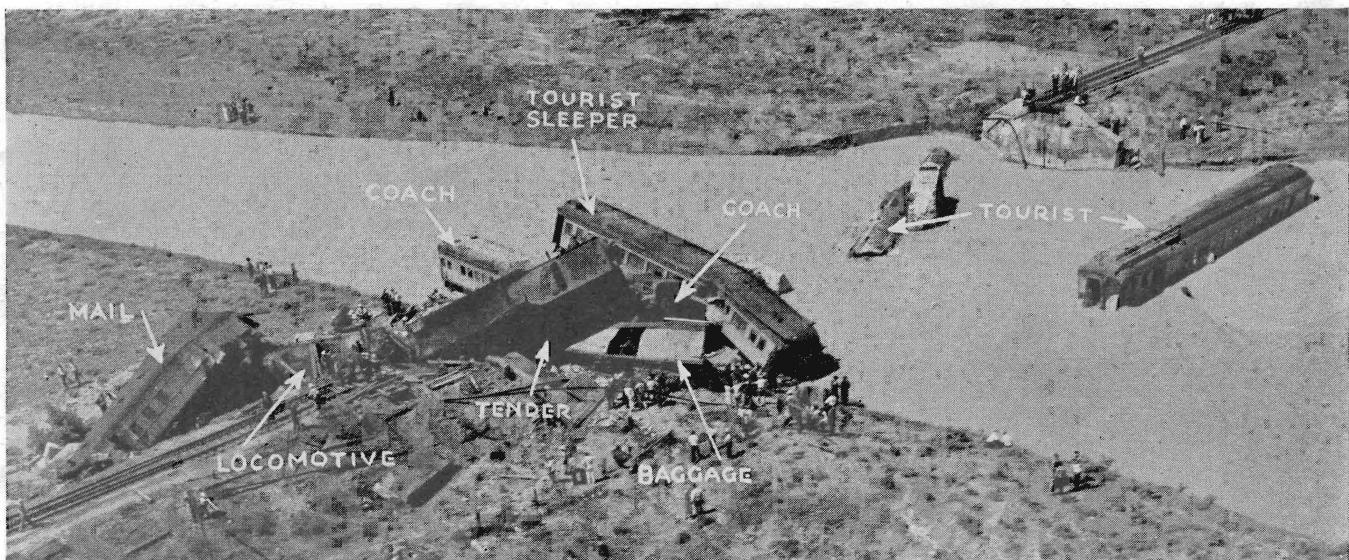
The bridge over Custer creek, which was completely demolished by the accident, was a single-track, steel and reinforced concrete structure with an overall length of 180 ft., including, from east to west, two 50-ft. through plate girder spans, followed by five 16-ft. precast, reinforced concrete deck spans. All of the spans were supported on concrete masonry piers or abutments, with spread footings, the abutments and the two larger piers in the main channel being carried down to a firm gravel foundation at a level of approximately 10 ft. below the normal bed of the stream, while the smaller piers supporting the slab spans, and out of the main channel, were carried down to a depth of about 8 ft. below the river bed. The bridge was located on a long section of tangent track, and on a 14-ft. fill. The depth of the bridge opening beneath the girder spans over the main channel was a maximum of approximately 16 ft., and the channel opening itself had proved more than adequate to carry any run-off which has occurred since the bridge was reconstructed in 1913 to replace a pile trestle built in 1907, at which time a careful survey was undertaken to determine the maximum requirements of a bridge in that location.

Custer Creek drains a rolling hilly area of approximately 133,000 acres extending approximately 25 miles upstream, an area that is characterized by unusually rapid run-off in severe storms, a condition which the railroad had taken into account in the design and construction of the bridge. Normally the stream is dry nine months of the year and at no time during the last 31 years has the water ever reached the height attained on June 19.

Opinion at the time of this writing, in advance of a thorough investigation, is that, in spite of the firm anchorage of the piers below the river bed, one or more of them were undermined by the rapid onrush of the water occasioned by the heavy storm in the uplands, either causing the washout of one or more of the spans prior to the arrival of the train, or their dislocation under the weight of the train. In any event, early photographs of the disaster show that the first main pier from the east end of the bridge, supporting adjacent ends of the 50-ft.



Elevation of the Custer Creek Bridge



Locomotive and Cars Piled Up On West Bank and In Stream

girder spans, had been moved out of line, and that the tops of several of the other piers had been damaged severely, obviously by the impact of the equipment at the time of the accident.

The main pier found out of alignment was skewed sharply from its normal position at right angles to the centerline of the bridge, the upstream, or north end having been swung to a position where the longitudinal centerline of the pier appears to be an angle of more than 45 deg. with the centerline of the creek, rather than parallel with it. Whether this indication of slip on its foundation was caused by undermining and water pressure alone, or by a combination of these factors assisted by some heavy impact, is still to be determined.

Neither has it been developed which of the spans gave way first, although, from the location of the demolished locomotive, tender, mail and baggage car, on the west bank of the stream, it is evident that this equipment had passed over one of the 50-ft. girders. The mail car came to rest on top of the locomotive on the north side of the track with the tender, baggage car and one coach piled up on the track on the west bank. One coach and one tourist sleeping car stopped upright on the bank of the river and parallel to it and were partly submerged, while the two tourist sleeping cars dropped into the main channel, approximately 50 ft. from the east bank. One remained upright south of the bridge and the other landed on its side north of the bridge and against the pier. Both were completely submerged.

From the position of the locomotive on the west bank to the north side of the track, it would appear that if all of the spans were in position at the time of the arrival of the train, the north, or upstream, side of one or more of the spans settled first, throwing the locomotive to the north side of the track. Since both the engineman and fireman of the train were killed, the exact condition of the bridge at the time of the accident may be difficult to determine.

#### The Milwaukee's Statement

The Milwaukee road on June 20 issued the following statement in regard to the wreck:

"The Milwaukee Road's Olympian, which left Chicago Friday night, via St. Paul-Minneapolis, destined to Seattle-Tacoma, went into a creek near Saugus, Mont., early

Sunday morning when a cloudburst in Custer Creek Valley, about twenty-five miles east of Miles City, undermined the center pier of a steel girder bridge that has carried all storms since the line was built 30 years ago.

"There was no rain at the time the Olympian reached the bridge. Therefore the crew had no warning of the great volume of water filling the valley and undermining the bridge.

"The engine, baggage car, mail car, two coaches and two tourist sleepers dropped into the opening. The engine crew, baggage man, mail clerk, express clerk and several passengers are known to be dead, apparently drowned.

"The diner, two Pullmans and the observation car remained upright, since have been detoured and are now en route to Seattle. The hospital train from Miles City returned there at 6 a. m., mountain time, with 47 injured. Probably as many as 35 passengers drowned. This accident, over which railroad had no control, is the first in 20 years in which a paying passenger lost his life on the Milwaukee Road."

H. A. Scandrett, president, also issued a statement to employees, saying that the sole thought and effort of the management is being directed to the care of the injured and to easing the grief of those who lost relatives and friends. He said the accident resulted from a condition that resulted without warning and was not due to any shortcoming in the operating organization.

## Roads Ask National Wage Conferences

WASHINGTON, D. C.

**C**OMING as the next step in the wage reduction controversy the Carriers' Joint Conference Committee has requested representatives of 19 national railroad labor organizations to meet with it in Chicago on June 28, for the purpose of discussing the proposed reduction in wages. The announcement states that the Carriers' Joint Conference Committee, which is composed of 15 railway officers from all sections of the country, has been authorized to carry to a conclusion