

Asa Hall Hancock, July 13th, 1920

By Steve Lutz

Of all the activities firefighters and other responders are involved in, the one that most often endangers their lives is not rushing into a burning building nor is it performing a daring rescue. The most common way firefighters are subjected to threat to life and limb is responding to a call in their emergency vehicle. A heavy vehicle, narrow streets or winding roads, inattentive motorists, weather conditions and surging adrenaline all contribute to the danger.

The first Utah firefighter killed in the line of duty was the victim of a fire engine crash. He would not be the last. Vehicle related incidents continue to be one of the most common non-fireground causes of death and injury to emergency responders, not just in Utah but nationwide as the following statistics attest. In 2005 almost 5,000 firefighters were injured responding to or returning from calls. During that same year 23 firefighters were killed while responding or returning from calls. The only Utah firefighter death in 2005 was the result of a truck rollover.

The last horse drawn apparatus in service with Salt Lake City was replaced by a new Seagrave truck with a 65 ft aerial ladder just after Christmas 1913. Fire Chief William Bywater said that it was modeled after the latest New York design and was second to none. It had a ladder pipe that could be operated from the ground using ropes attached to the nozzle. It carried 240 feet of ground ladders. The tractor drawn truck had every modern device including both a gong and a siren. It even carried an "oxygen purified breathing helmet", quite an unusual and advanced piece of equipment at that time.

Many drivers of the old horse drawn apparatus including John D. Hansen, learned to drive the new motor rigs. These new vehicles had greater hauling capacity and were capable of faster speeds than galloping horses could sustain but there were also some similarities. Open cabs were the norm for years to come and many of the engines did not have pumps but had chemical tanks in which water was propelled through the hose by an acid/alkaline chemical reaction. Steam driven pumps and chemical tanks were eventually abandoned in favor of pumps driven by internal combustion engines that also drove the wheels.



The crew of SLCFD Station 2, John Hansen driving. Photo courtesy of Utah State Historical Society all rights reserved.

Chief Bywater was a progressive Chief who pushed the new technology and provided some training to use it. But like today, training didn't solve every problem. Adrenaline caused apparatus operators to drive fast, sometimes with catastrophic results.

On the evening of July 12th 1920, Station 2 got the call to a fire at 341 Marguerite Court in downtown Salt Lake City. Engine 2, a right hand drive, Seagrave chemical engine with a crew of five headed south on 200 West. The crew rang the big brass bell on top to clear the way. There was no siren, no flashing lights. As the engine approached the intersection of 300 South, driver J. D. Hansen, a 13 year veteran of the department, saw an electric trolley car approaching the intersection from the east.

By the time the trolley's motorman D.A. Nixon saw that it was a fire engine rushing towards the intersection he knew it was too late to stop. Nixon said, "As is always done upon crossing intersections, I shut off the current as the car approached Second West Street. The car was coasting across the intersection and just as we reached the middle of the of the crossing, I saw the headlights of a machine. Then I heard the gong. That was the first intimation I had of the approaching fire wagon. I applied the power in order to make the other side of the crossing. All the while I was watching the onrushing machine. As I saw was he was about to turn west I knew there was no possibility of averting a crash and I used my brakes."

At the same time, Hansen instantly knew the best he could do was to not drive straight into the side of the streetcar. He told a reporter, "I saw the streetcar as it crossed into the

intersection and my efforts were immediately centered on avoiding a collision and, above all, a direct collision with the streetcar. I turned west on Third South Street but the speed of the streetcar carried it into our path.”

The truck hit the streetcar at the front wheels. The streetcar was spun off of the tracks. Station officer Lieutenant Asa Hancock was thrown from the front seat against metal grating on the side of the streetcar. His scalp split open and he was knocked unconscious.

Fireman F.R. Roskelley was thrown from the rig, dislocating his right hip and left elbow. Fireman J.R. Boshard also flew off the truck, dislocated his left shoulder, smashed his face on the pavement and had some mean road rash. Hansen’s impact broke the steering wheel as he was thrown out but he was only badly bruised and shaken up. Second grade fireman David Price lacerated his scalp and was badly contused when hurled from the truck. All but Hansen were knocked unconscious.

A call was made to the fire alarm office. They sent ambulances and other help. The injured were taken to the nearby emergency hospital at the Union Pacific Railroad depot by police ambulance and passing motorists. Ironically this depot was the intended destination of the ill-fated streetcar. The motorman and conductor were the only people on the streetcar. Neither were hurt.

As is often the case, the fire call was of minor importance. A young boy was slightly burned by a very small accidental fire, put out by the home’s occupants. The crew from Station 1 responded but there was nothing to do there.

Drs. Galligan and Landenberger performed emergency surgery on Lt. Hancock but soon determined that he needed more care than their little hospital could provide. He was evacuated to Holy Cross Hospital where he underwent further surgery for a basal skull fracture, broken scapula and internal injuries. It was no use. He would never marry his fiancée, Madge Crouch. He would never see his parents in Salt Lake City or his sister back in his hometown of Council Bluffs. Iowa. He died early the next morning without regaining consciousness.

A few days later, 43 year old, Asa Hall Hancock, 16 year fire veteran, was buried in the Mt. Olivet Cemetery after a funeral conducted by the Knights of Pythias Lodge of which he was a member. Chief Bywater was the main speaker and the pallbearers were all fire department colleagues.

Chief Bywater, city detectives and the claims agent for the Utah Light and Traction Company, the trolley’s owner, arrived at the crash scene soon after the wreck to investigate. The ULT wrecking crew was already working to get the car back on the tracks.

Bywater was furious and shook his fist and yelled at the motorman, Nixon. The next morning a calmer Bywater gave his assessment, “While I do not care to hastily blame the streetcar operators for the catastrophe, as much investigation as I made last night induces

me to believe they were to blame. In the first place, streetcars are supposed to stop when they hear a fire signal. In the second place, the motorman did not make the right attempt to prevent the accident. Instead of stopping his car when he saw the apparatus coming, he made effort to take his car to the other side of the street. It is my belief that the traction company is entirely to blame for the accident and a complete investigation will be held to determine the guilty party.”

The City immediately launched a Coroners Inquest into the wreck. A dozen witnesses testified before Judge William Reger and a Coroner’s Jury including, Driver J. D. Hanson, Chief Bywater and motorman Nixon. Nixon complained that the Chief had “Upbraided him in violent language.” The jury returned a verdict that both vehicles were speeding in violation of city ordinance but they avoided placing blame on either driver. The fire engine was estimated to be traveling between 25 and 35 mph while the trolley was going 18-25. While these may seem to be minimal speeds by today’s standards, brakes and steering mechanisms then were not nearly as effective as modern designs. In fact most cars and trucks of the time only had rear mechanical brakes. There was no such thing as power or air brakes nor had power steering been invented.

Within a few days of the verdict Police Chief Joseph Burbidge ordered a crackdown on vehicles that failed to yield to emergency vehicles. Section 43 of City Code said, “Every person in charge of any vehicle in or upon any street of this city, upon the approach of any vehicle or apparatus of the fire department or any police patrol wagon or any ambulance, or the emergency crew of the waterworks department or any auxiliary fire apparatus, shall, when signaled, immediately stop such vehicle as near as possible to the right hand curb of such street; nor shall such vehicle be moved until such emergency vehicle shall have passed the scene.”

Any emergency vehicle driver today knows just how often motorists fail to yield to them despite high intensity lighting, ear splitting sirens and air horns. Imagine if we still just used a brass bell to clear the way! Perhaps we’d be better off if we assumed that our modern warning devices are about as effective as a gong and then drive accordingly. With cell phones and megabass stereo systems more likely to be a listening priority for a lot of drivers it’s not an bad assumption.

If there was one thing that would have made the difference between life and death in this case and with nearly every other fatal firefighter motor vehicle accident in Utah since, it would have been seatbelts. In 1920 they had never been installed on a fire apparatus. That is certainly not the case now. Every vehicle manufactured since the 1960’s has been required to have seatbelts, and yet many firefighters still fail to use this proven death prevention technology. Make a difference, Don’t move that apparatus without every person buckled in. The life you save might be your own.



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Top and bottom Photos: After the wreck, the Seagrave Engine 2 was towed to the SLCFD repair shops at Headquarters Station.

Middle: Looking east on 300 South to the intersection of 200 West. Gouges in the pavement show where the street car was thrown off of the left (north) tracks and spun toward the right. Notice the lack of tire skid marks. This probably indicates that the fire engine brakes did not lock up.

Case Study questions:

What right of way is given to emergency vehicles under current state traffic code?

What modern equipment might have helped avoid this tragedy?

You are the department safety officer. A new technology has recently been implemented on your department that has been involved in a serious accident. What processes/methods would you use to ensure safe and effective operations?

Give some examples of emergency services technologies that have encountered safety problems. How were the problems mitigated?

What SOPs are used in your area for emergency driving situations?

What SOPs are currently in place to deal with light rail accidents?

Is stopping distance a specification used in your area when new apparatus is to be purchased?

What policies for seatbelt usage are used in your area? What penalties are actually enforced for non-compliance?

Discussion question: Should all emergency vehicle drivers be required to obtain Commercial Drivers Licenses?



Oddly retouched photo of a street car similar to the one involved in the 1920 accident viewed through a spider web of power lines

Sources: Salt Lake Tribune, Deseret News, Jim Berry