



#38: 1922 Train Disaster

Humble was the site of a terrible train disaster in December 1922. Headlines in newspapers across the United States read: **"Passenger Express Sideswipes Engine with Headlight Out"** (Pittsburg, Pennsylvania); **"Between 8 and 15 Killed in Wreck Near Humble"** (Natchez, Mississippi); **"Life Toll High As Engines Hit Near Houston"** (San Bernardino, California); **"Train Crashes into Engine in Humble Depot"** (Burlington, Vermont)

Twenty-two persons were killed, and between 40 and 50 others injured, when "The Rabbit," passenger train No. 28 operated by the Houston East & Texas Railway, sideswiped a switch engine (Engine 439) Humble on an adjoining track near the Humble Train Depot. The wreck occurred around 10 PM. The headlight on the switch train was not on and was listed as the primary cause of the accident. A steam pipe was torn loose from the switch engine and poured clouds of high-pressure steam and scalding water over the passengers in the smoking car – the first coach of the passenger train.

Conductor Campsey was killed instantly. The train news dealer was found dead underneath a pile of candy, newspapers and magazines. Four other men had attempted to escape when the crash came and had caught the full force of the steam from the switch engine. Thirty-five passengers who fell or threw themselves on the floor of the car escaped with terrible burns. Many of the victims were scalded to death in their seats. While the conductor, the newsdealer and three other men were white, most of the dead and injured were African Americans.

The local Humble doctors were on scene immediately to treat the victims, including Dr. McKay Sr. and Dr. James Sandlin. The first of the injured were sent to Houston in automobiles. Later, the rest of the injured were rushed to hospitals in Houston on a special relief train which was made up when news of the wreck first was received.

The board of inquiry ultimately assigned responsibility for the accident on the nightwatchman, J. H. Smith, who had moved the switch engine to the location where it was hit by the passenger train.