

## Remote control locomotive kills railroad worker

(The following article by Hernán Rozemberg was posted on the San Antonio Express-News website on December 8.)

SAN ANTONIO -- A Union Pacific railroad employee was struck and killed early Sunday by a locomotive he was operating via remote control -- rekindling a debate over whether the devices are a technological boon or a safety hazard.

Jody Allen Herstine, 37, was using the waist-strapped remote-control device, which moves trains without the need of a conductor on board, to operate two locomotives shortly before 1 a.m. at the Union Pacific railyards on the near East Side when he was run over, said Mark Davis, a spokesman with the railroad.

Davis did not know if Herstine -- a 5-year Union Pacific switchman -- was hit from the front or from behind.

The National Safety Transportation Board and the Federal Railroad Administration have dispatched investigators to San Antonio to look into Herstine's death.

Reached at their Northwest Side home, Herstine's wife, Sara, was too distraught to give an interview. The couple had been married for two months.

"He was always such a good guy, loved by everybody. He'll be missed by everyone," she said amid sobs and tears as she walked into her house.

A man who identified himself as her stepfather said Herstine had been working at railyards since he was discharged from the Navy a decade ago.

Herstine had two children from a previous marriage. His parents and three sisters live in Pittsburgh, where he was born and raised, said the stepfather, who did not want his name used.

Herstine's death is not the first time concern has been raised over the fairly new practice of remote-control locomotive conducting.

An accident here in June injured a Union Pacific engineer near KellyUSA after the locomotive he was in was struck by another being operated by remote control.

Such occurrences have many railyard workers clamoring for an end to the remote controls, and several cities across the country have passed measures banning the technology.

The Union Pacific's Davis maintained that remote-control system has been in place in Canada for more than a decade, and data show a 50 percent reduction in railyard accidents.

In the railroad's U.S. experience with the system thus far -- it was started in San Antonio about a year and a half ago -- the same trend is developing, he said.

Warren Flatau, a spokesman for the FRA, noted that his agency will be releasing the results of a nationwide audit into the safety of the remote-controlled locomotives early next year.

But the leader of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, a union with 350 members in San Antonio, said although the cause of Herstine's death has yet to be determined, his union's warnings about the limitations and risks of remote-control work are becoming a reality.

Don Hahs, international president of the union, said controlling engines from the ground is dangerous. He also said the two weeks of training workers is not enough. Even worse, he added, is the practice of sending conductors out without any backup.

Davis confirmed that Herstine was working alone at the time of the accident.

"The system is designed for that. An employee working by himself in that situation is normal," Davis said.

Far from it, countered Hahs. For mere safety concerns, it should be at least a two-person operation, he insisted.

"It's a total mistake to send a switchman out by himself," he said.

"We've been saying all along that this new technology was implemented too quick and with little oversight, and it could cause accidents."

The matter is further complicated by the fact that it has spawned a fierce inter-union rivalry.

While Hahs' Brotherhood strongly opposes the new system, the United Transportation Union has embraced it.

Frank Wilner, spokesman for the UTU, said the union signed a contract with Union Pacific two years ago accepting use of remote-control units -- under condition that no jobs are lost and that proper training is given.

So far, Wilner said, he has to agree with Union Pacific's findings.

But, he noted, enough safety concerns have been raised that his shop lobbied the Senate for an investigation. That probe led to the FRA audit.

"We're extremely concerned about this fatality," Wilner said, noting that his union has between 550 and 600 members in San Antonio.

**Monday, December 08, 2003**