Mini-Train Driver at Griffith Park Killed by Robber: Crime: Ride operator known to many children as 'Uncle Stan' is slain after finishing his day at the controls when he refuses to turn over receipts to a gunman.

October 13, 1992 | MICHAEL CONNELLY | TIMES STAFF WRITER

Train engineer Stanley Diamond was able to make children think they were traveling to New York, New Orleans or even to Never Never Land, though in reality they never left the mini-locomotives he guided on the tiny tracks in Griffith Park.

The 49-year-old Glendale man who wore overalls and the traditional engineer's hat had a following of young people and their parents that numbered in the hundreds. Many children called him "Uncle Stan" and were sad if they had come to the park to find it was his day off.

But all of that changed Monday when visitors to the park met with a harsh urban reality. The little trains were idle because Diamond had been shot to death during a robbery the night before when he refused to give up the day's receipts to a robber.

"I can't believe it," said one woman, standing with her young son outside the closed Los Feliz Station near where Diamond was killed. "We came yesterday and he was so nice. He said the train was going to New York. He was just a nice man. I can't believe this could happen."

Los Angeles police said Diamond was killed by a gunman about 7 p.m. Sunday when he had gone to the Los Feliz Station to pick up the receipts. He had driven from the Travel Town station on the north side of the park, where he had spent the day as engineer on a miniature steam engine named "Courage."

Police said there was a struggle over the money—believed to be about $2,000—and Diamond was shot by the robber, who was wearing a motorcycle helmet to conceal his identity. The rides had closed for the day and there were no children nearby.

Don Gustavson, the president of GP Recreations, which has a contract with the city to operate the two train rides in the park, said he had not decided when he would reopen the train rides. He stressed that the rides are safe during park hours but that he wanted to confer with employees before reopening.

He said he also may arrange for some kind of counseling for employees so they will be better prepared to deal with children who come to the park expecting to see Diamond.

"We need to be prepared to deal with the children who are going to ask for Stan," Gustavson said. "He was probably the best engineer we had. The children loved him. Travel Town was a better place to come to because of him."
Those who knew Diamond said he worked at the park because he was interested in making children happy, the trains being only a secondary interest. He turned the seven-minute, $1.25 rides into adventures. He also had a knack for remembering young faces and welcoming children back, asking them where they wanted to go on the train.

"He was like a circus clown--all the kids were drawn to him," said Clarence Pearl, an assistant manager at Travel Town. "He'd say, 'All aboard, we're going to Never Never Land or Birthday Land.' He'd always make up a destination and they loved it."

A Burbank Little League baseball coach, Diamond lived alone in a small apartment a few blocks from the park. He formerly was employed as a security guard and a factory worker before he "pestered" Travel Town workers for a job three years ago, Gustavson said.

"He was totally into the kids, making them smile," said Wes Detamore, an assistant operations manager for the city's Department of Recreation and Parks. "There were people who came here regularly just to see him. They called him Uncle Stan. We were always getting letters from parents and schools thanking him for making it a good time."

Jesus Morga, a recreational assistant at Travel Town, said Diamond never missed a day of work and was so dedicated to the job that Morga was not surprised to hear that Diamond had struggled with the robber who killed him.

"That sounds like Stan," Morga said. "He was so dedicated to this place. He didn't want to give up the money."

Lt. Dave Waterman said detectives are pursuing several avenues of investigation but no arrests have been made. Last year, the pony ride concession next to the Los Feliz Station was robbed on a Sunday night by a gunman who fired six shots but hit no one. But police said it did not appear to be related to Diamond's killing.

The killing renewed concerns over safety in the park and officials from both the company that operates the rides and the city said meetings will take place this week to address them.

"We have been concerned about after-hours safety for years," said Gustavson, the president of GP Recreations. "We have changed procedures and I thought we were in pretty good shape. Obviously, we weren't.

"Like any small business, I guess we are subjected to the robberies and violence of the city. We are a business that provides low-cost entertainment for the children of the city and to have someone like Stan murdered for just money, it seems so senseless."

Security in the park is largely provided by city park rangers, who do not carry guns. Rangers declined to comment on the killing Monday and referred reporters to Los Angeles police detectives.
Detective Gary M. Gruebel said Sunday's incident and the July 14, 1991, robbery at the pony ride concession--also on a Sunday night--were the only robberies at park concessions in recent years. However, he said police take three or four reports a month on robberies, often carjackings, in the park.

Few of his co-workers or employers knew much about Diamond's life outside of work. One said he was a widower, others said he had never been married.

His landlord at a small apartment building on Thompson Avenue in Glendale said Diamond moved in earlier this year after the death of his mother, with whom he had lived in a larger apartment.

The landlord, Joe Franco, said Diamond had told him that his only family was a sister who lived in Colorado. When Diamond showed off pictures, they were not photos of family but of Little League teams he had coached, Franco added.

"This is hard to take," Franco said. "He was a good man who lived for a child's smile. Now he gets killed.

"This city . . . " said Franco, not completing his sentence.

Andy Meyer voiced the same frustrations when he and his two children found the train rides closed. He said it was lucky his children were too young to comprehend the harsh lesson of Diamond's death. It wasn't lost on him, however.

"I'd like to say this is a really big shock but unfortunately it isn't," said Meyer, a lifelong Los Angeles resident. "You come here expecting it to be a place not affected by the city's problems. But I guess that's not the case."


Fired Co-Worker Held in Engineer's Slaying

October 15, 1992 | MICHAEL CONNELLY | TIMES STAFF WRITER

A former mini-train engineer at Travel Town in Griffith Park has been arrested as the suspected getaway driver in the killing of a popular engineer during a robbery at the park this week, Los Angeles police said Wednesday.

John B. Moore, 28, was arrested at his Palmdale home Tuesday evening. Detectives identified him as the driver of a motorcycle that a gunman used to escape after killing Stanley Diamond on Sunday, police said.
Moore, who worked at Travel Town with Diamond until being fired earlier this year, was being held without bail at Parker Center on suspicion of murder, Lt. Dave Waterman said. Investigators are expected to ask prosecutors to charge him today with murder and robbery.

Waterman said Moore has denied any involvement in the slaying and investigators have not identified the man who shot Diamond, 49, of Glendale once in the upper chest about 7 p.m. Sunday.

Diamond was shot when he struggled to keep a bank bag containing cash collected at the end of the day at three Griffith Park children's amusement concessions. The robbery and shooting occurred near the Los Feliz station, on the opposite side of the park from Travel Town, where Diamond was an engineer and was well known to children.

"Information from witnesses and other information led us to Mr. Moore," Waterman said. "We don't know who the shooter was yet."

Waterman declined to elaborate on the identification of Moore. Earlier this week, police said the gunman wore a motorcycle helmet during the robbery.

Neither the gun used to kill Diamond nor the money taken--more than $2,000--has been recovered, police said.

Diamond, who worked at Travel Town for nearly three years, was a familiar face for children who rode the trains. Many asked for him and he often received letters of praise from parents and schools.

The news that a former employee was arrested in the case hit other employees and company operators hard.

"I don't know how to react," said Don Gustavson, president of GP Recreations, which operates the train ride concessions in Griffith Park. "I am shocked that anybody would kill anybody. It doesn't make sense to me. That we had an employee that would do it is also shocking."

"The mood is not too good here," added Clarence Pearl, an assistant manager at Travel Town. "We haven't gotten over Stanley getting killed. Now we hear this."

Still, Pearl said, he and other employees had suspicions that the robbery had been committed by someone who knew the procedures for collecting money at the end of the day.

"You had to have worked here to know how to do that robbery--that was my theory," Pearl said.

Gustavson said Moore, who rode a motorcycle to work, was a train engineer at the Los Feliz station for six months until he was fired in January for repeatedly missing work.

Gustavson has scheduled a memorial service for Diamond on Monday at Travel Town. "He was very popular and dear to us," he said. "The main idea is to find whoever did it but we want to remember Stanley."
The victim's younger sister, Michele Diamond, flew to Los Angeles from Colorado to arrange a private memorial service for family members. She said Wednesday that her brother never complained or worried that his job could be dangerous. She said he had taken on the task of collecting receipts from the park's three concessions because it meant extra pay.

"I don't think it even entered his mind it could be dangerous," Michele Diamond said. "He was like a lot of people, scraping to get by.

"I feel very sad for this city because things are so out of hand," she said. "I hope someday soon people can feel safe, especially in a place where children should be safe. I wish the people here could take back their city."