
From My Desk to Yours

Each month I receive railroad employees magazines. When reading the July issue of the Illinois Central magazine, I came across a very timely and interesting commentary on the highway grade crossing problem. It was written by Wayne A. Johnston, President of the Illinois Central. As stated by Mr. Johnston, the content of this letter is intended

as a subject of conversation when IC employees are talking with their friends and neighbors about crossing accidents. Because these comments apply not only to IC men but to all railroad men, we have obtained permission from Mr. Johnston to reprint this letter.—John H. Dunn, Editor

The Crossing Accident Problem

Our streets and highways, busy with automotive traffic, become even more crowded during the months of summer vacations. As a result, the problem of grade crossing protection becomes greater than usual.

A study of crossing accidents over the past 20 years reveals that no mechanical safety device is as good as the old safety rule—stop, look and listen. Trains cannot stop quickly, nor can they swerve around obstacles on the track. That puts the burden on the pedestrian or motorist approaching the crossing. Unless they practice sensible rules of safety, no known device can prevent crossing accidents.

Proof of this fact is the record of the last 20 years, during which there has been a slight decrease in accidents at crossings without special protection and an increase at crossings with special protection. The latter, of course, are installed at the most heavily traveled crossings, where railroads have spent large sums to provide complex multiple light signals.

The record shows that 90 per cent of all accidents involve motor vehicles. All too often these vehicles disregard the warning lights, the ringing bells and the lowered gates at the crossing. Vehicles moving at high speeds try to beat trains to the crossing; they drive around single lowered gate and even crash through double lowered gates into the sides of trains. Most of the injuries and deaths of the past two decades could have been prevented by simple precautions on the part of drivers of trucks and automobiles.

When there are accidents, a hue and a cry is raised for greater crossing protection, and all too often the public expects the railroads to pay the full bill. From the earliest times, railroads have given warning to travelers of grade crossings ahead. The Illinois Central, for example, builds and maintains more than 10,000 crossbuck signs at no cost to the public. As a taxpayer, it has made a big contribution to the public safety.

Federal officials have recognized that railroads benefit only slightly from the installation of crossing protection devices, and they have established 10 per cent of the cost of improvements at existing crossings as the railroads' fair share of costs.

There are 5,875 grade crossings in our territory without automatic signals. If the Illinois Central had to install automatic signals at all such crossings (most of which are out in the country where traffic is light) the cost would be a fantastic 60 million dollars, with additional expense of about 4½ million dollars annually for maintenance.

Actually, the greatest hope for a downward trend in crossing accidents is public education. Mechanical devices are important, but not nearly as important as understanding of the causes of accidents. Every member of the public needs to realize that pedestrians and motorists can easily stop at crossings, but that trains cannot. The alert driver is the greatest safety device of all.

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