

Editor's Note:

Please send photos and brief descriptions of your safety restraint applications for publication here. These range from sturdy armrests, a safety strap strung across the opening, half-doors of cargo netting or canvas (keeps the breeze off the knees as well as affording some protection) to safety belts. Obviously some afford more protection than others.

From Dave Hope,

"Jan, to add to your request for seat belt info. Almost all MOW cars have seat belts. On our run on Oct 20/21 from Willits to Fort Bragg and back every car had seat belts except one "A" car. This is not a required rule for MOW but is strongly suggested. After several accidents in which people were hurt by not having seat belts we became very conscious of their value. They are easy to install, cheap new from JCWhitney, or can be scrounged from an auto wrecking yard."

Seat Belts and Motorcars

by Denny Anspach

I am an unabashed advocate for frame-mounted seat belts for motorcar operators and all passengers. For about eight years, I have personally exercised this rule on my own NARCOA-qualified motorcars, i.e. no one rides without a fastened seat belt.

However, at one time there was one serious breach, this:

On a gorgeous September afternoon, we are rolling north on the Nevada Northern Railway through the vast and grand Steptoe Valley about MP 65.0. We have about 20 cars and are looking forward to arriving at the end of line (some would say "the end of the earth") at Shafter M.P 18, where the current tracks have been recently reconnected with the old Western Pacific (now Union Pacific) main line. We have just stopped at the ruins of the old steam-days coaling depot at Goshute MP 71. Prior to leaving, I relinquish the throttle of my 1937 Rock Island S2 to another qualified operator. He carefully fastens his seat belt, while I unthinkingly and carelessly do not fasten mine.

We depart the third in line behind two MT19s, one with a trailer. I relax in the passenger seat, feeling pretty good not to have the throttle in hand—I can now observe at my leisure and at length the galloping wild mustangs, manes flying, over the flats of the Goshute dry lake far in the distance. The old QB engine smoothly burbles away (music to the ears) and I almost immediately doze off.

I awake to a brake application and observe the two MT19s ahead rattle through a coarse gravel grade crossing, the first such we had encountered all day. They throw up a cloud of dust, cross safely in turn, accelerate and continue on. We slow somewhat and confidently hit the same crossing, but with a difference: the car ahead has just kicked a rock into a flangeway, which one of our front wheels then hits squarely. The car derails immediately to the right, rolls on bumping across the rough crossing, momentum finally carrying it off the end onto ties bare of ballast on the far side. The car hits the ties like a brick wall, forcing the car to then rotate sharply to the left.

While the operator stays tightly still strapped to his seat, his passenger (me) is propelled like a projectile head first out of the side of the car almost 15 feet, my shoulder-first landing cushioned slightly (but enough) by a big sagebrush bush. I am stunned, battered and bruised all over, but with no broken bones, and most fortunately, no broken neck. The motorcar has the roof supports ripped apart and both front and rear axles are seriously bent. Testimony as to the force of derailment is that it takes almost two hours of patient pattern searching of the desert later that evening to at last find my glasses, found almost ten feet from where I had landed.

This was an accident that could well have killed or forever disabled me, under most circumstances. If the car had been rotated even more to the left, I would have been propelled directly onto the tracks, where mere injury would have been unlikely.

Although the derailment would not have been prevented, there is no doubt whatsoever that if I had had my seat belt properly fastened, I would not have been thrown from the car, hazarding my own life, and the support and care of my family.

Several years previously, on the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, Dr. Bob Church's MT 14 (with a disabled MT 19 in tow) hit a sun-kink on a superelevated curve that derailed the car, and as the car hit the exposed ties, it too turned transversely with a brick-wall stop. Both Bob and Jeanne were firmly strapped in, and although pretty severely shaken up, neither was injured in any way. For the observers on the ground at the time, and for those looking at this incident only in retrospect, there was not a scintilla of a doubt then, nor now, that the seat belts alone prevented both of them from being forcefully thrown out the side of the car.

I have clear in mind other motorcar derailments resulting in injuries over the years where the simple addition of seat belts would have either minimized resulting personal injuries, or prevented them altogether.

Motorcars almost all have a very low center of gravity, even though the "house" or cab above it may be relatively high. As a result, when derailment occurs, motorcars usually stay upright. Rollovers can and do occur but usually only if the derailment causes the car to go down an embankment, or the special circumstance where a short wheel-base car (i.e. MT19) stubs its toe (i.e. turntable hitting a high crossing). Even under those circumstances being strapped in one's seat is better than being thrown around in the cab like a rag doll, or worse, being thrown out to the tender mercies of firmly fixed steel rails and exposed ties.

The primary purpose of motorcar seat belts is clearly and simply is minimize injury by restraining one from being thrown out of his or her seat, and most importantly, actually out of the car. Keep in mind that if one is thrown out of the car, it is far more likely to be head or upper body first.

Suitable aftermarket seat belts are commonly available at NAPA and other good auto supply stores. They come complete with mounting hardware. An inexpensive source is the back seat belt assemblies obtained from cars in wrecking yards. Back seat belts usually have had little use so are usually in good condition. Seat belts should always be mounted firmly to the frame of the motorcar, never the frame of the seat, or simply through the flimsy sheet metal or plywood flooring.

Open, and "historical" motorcars without separate seats are a special problem for which there may be no satisfactory seat belt solution. I have loved the feel of mindlessly breezing along in my open 1946 CNW M19, while at the same time, I have become graphically aware of what can and will happen to me, and those others aboard whom I love, should the car derail at any but the lowest speed.

Argument has been made that if we cannot mount seat belts to restrain shoulders (as in automobiles) that we should not have seat belts at all. On most motorcars, this type of restraint is simply not possible, of course and in this regard lap restraints alone have to be an acceptable compromise.

Argument is also made that not having seat belts is an important personal expression of the type of independence looked for in this hobby. In the real world of survival and rationality, however, "common sense" should easily trump "independence" in this regard.

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