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Derailed Tank Car Closes 2 Bridges

By Joan Little
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The Poplar Street and MacArthur bridges were closed for more than two hours Sunday night while emergency crews righted a derailed tank car loaded with white phosphorous, a highly inflammable chemical.

The tank car, owned by Monsanto Co., derailed about 4:15 p.m. Sunday at First and Carroll streets, near the company's Queeny plant, south of downtown.

All barge traffic on the Mississippi River also was stopped while a crew operating a railroad crane lifted the car in the air and set it down on the railroad tracks about 10:30 p.m. Sunday.

The bridges were re-opened to traffic at 11:25 p.m. Sunday after the tank car was righted. The closing of the Poplar Street Bridge about 9 p.m. caused a traffic snarl on both sides of the river, authorities said. The MacArthur bridge is a railroad bridge only.

Diane Bartolanza, a spokeswoman for Monsanto Co., said the tank car was fully loaded with 20,000 gallons of phosphorous, a chemical that ignites if exposed to air. The chemical forms a thick white cloud that is irritating but not noxious, Bartolanza said.

About 75 St. Louis firefighters and dozens of St. Louis police stood ready to evacuate parts of the southern edge of downtown and the Soulard area if the tank car sprang a leak while being righted.

Frank Schaper, spokesman for the St. Louis Fire Department, said firefighters had stood by at the scene to spray the tanker with water in case it ruptured in the move.

Schaper said the department had prepared for a "worst case scenario" by putting equipment and firefighters at Broadway and Lafayette Avenue and at the City Hall parking lot. The crews were told to evacuate their immediate areas if the tank car leaked.

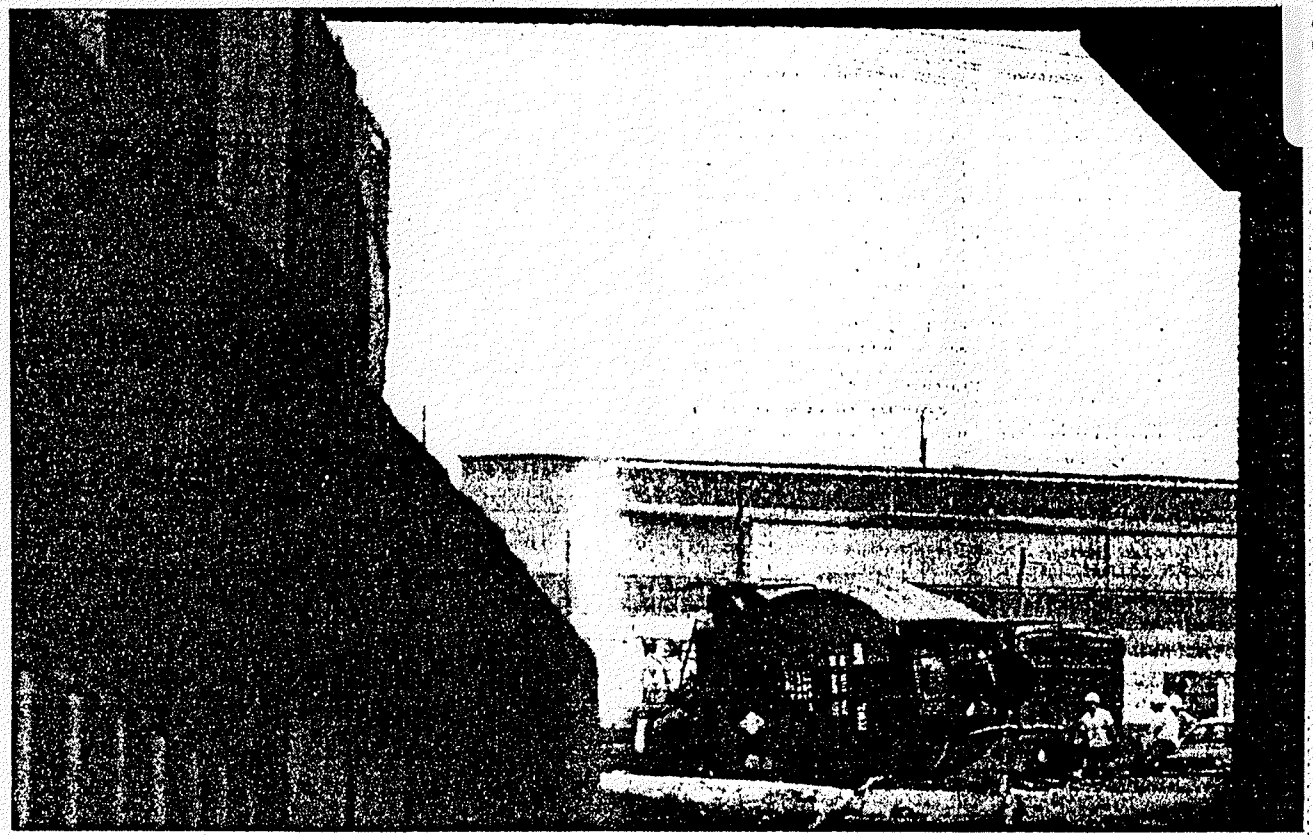
Bartolanza said the tank car was the last of 15 cars being pulled by a Union Pacific Railroad Co. freight train when it derailed. The cause of the derailment was under investigation by railroad officials Sunday night.

"We have no idea, at this point, how it derailed," Schaper said.

Bartolanza said the tank car had originated at Soda Springs, Idaho, and was on its way to Monsanto's Carondelet plant when it derailed.

Monsanto uses phosphorous to make detergent products and food products such as toothpaste and soda.

Emergency crews wore protective masks and equipment and used a special railroad crane to right the tank car, authorities said. The car with the phosphorous weighs about 400,000 pounds, Bartolanza said.



Wes Paz/Post-Dispatch

A railroad tank car lying on its side after it derailed Sunday at First and Carroll streets, south of downtown St. Louis.

The crane had to be brought in from 30 miles away, causing a delay in righting the tank car, she said.

The thick white smoke that is formed by exposed phosphorous is irritating to the eyes, nose and throat, Bartolanza said, but she said it was not a toxic substance.

"It could cause serious problems for drivers on the bridges, which is why the decision was made to temporarily close them," Bartolanza said.