



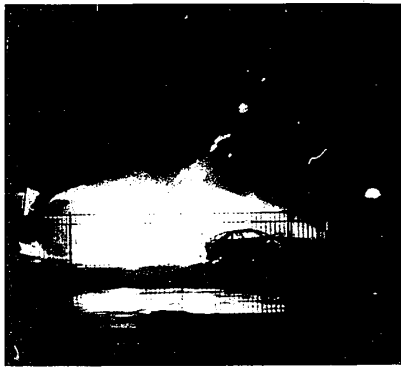
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This blaze, ignited by the crash a tandem-trailer carrying gas, claimed the life of a 23-year-old Detroit woman.

Tanker blaze puts new heat on double rigs

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI
The crash and explosion of a double-bottom tanker in Southfield has stirred a long-smoldering controversy over the safety of the gargantuan vehicles.

The death of 23-year-old Mary Rish in a blaze which sent flames streaming 300 feet into the night sky has focused new light on the giant tandem-trailer rigs and the competency of their drivers.

Although this was one of the more spectacular incidents, accidents involving double-bottoms and other tankers are not uncommon. Between September, 1976 and February, 1977 there were more than 30 tanker accidents in Michigan, according to the latest statistics available. Seventeen were directly attributable to vehicle defects or driving error, said a spokesman for the Automobile Club of Michigan.

The tandem-tankers are valued for their tight-cornering capabilities and excellent maneuverability in tight spaces.

The Michigan Trucking Association maintains the accident rate for the big double-bottoms is "no better or no worse" than for other trucks which ply the state's roads. Nevertheless, governmental plans are in the works to improve the competency of the drivers. Others have talked of making the vehicles themselves safer.

"They're top heavy. Once you put weight above a certain point they become prone to tipping over," said the AAA spokesman. He added that the two trailers are very hard to control in "panic situations."

Guidelines drawn up by the Michigan Public Service Commission (PSC) and recently forwarded to the state legislature, have focused on improving the caliber of drivers. "The question of our authority boils down to the quality of those people who are going to operate the vehicles," said Hugh Roach, director of PSC staff services.

UNDER PRESENT POLICY, anyone who can obtain a chauffeur's license is eligible to drive a double-bottom tanker. The guidelines which are being reviewed by the legislative bureaucracy specifies several marked changes.

Tanker drivers would have to be at least 21 years of age and would have to have a minimum of 3,000 hours of experience driving commercial vehicles weighing more than 40,000 pounds.

Prospective drivers would also be required to complete an additional 60 hours of on-the-road training in a double-bottom tanker.

The AAA spokesman said several drivers involved in the 30 tanker accidents had had their licenses suspended at some time in their careers and that a number had also accumulated between 14 and 27 driving points in a five-year period.

"Only two drivers did not receive a traffic citation in the past five years," he said.

"This is not to say," he added, "that all drivers are untrained. But there was a great deal of driver error—improper lane usage, for example—involved in the accidents."

SOME PUBLIC OFFICIALS say that the PSC-proposed regulations fail to go far enough and have hinted that they would like to see the lumbering tandem rigs banned from Michigan's roads, altogether.

Thirty-five states allow the double-bottoms to roll on their roads. Jack McNamara, director of the Michigan Trucking Association, said that even though some states are putting up legislative roadblocks, there has never been a state which has allowed the tandems to roll and then rescinded the privilege.

Democratic Floor Leader Joseph Forbes (D-Oak Park) wrote to one of his constituents that he was pursuing "all expeditious action to get double-bottom tankers off the highways."

House Speaker Bobby Crim (D-Davison) said, "I know they're unsafe. Other states have made them do things, all kinds of things to improve safety. I don't know whether it means stricter rules or whether it means taking them off the road."

The PSC guidelines, which supposedly have been in preparation since the legislature voted the commission that authority in 1974, have also been referred to a special house subcommittee headed by Rep. Francis Spaniola (D-Corunna). Brandy Eskelson, assistant to the subcommittee, said a number of committee members, including Spaniola, felt the regulations failed to go far enough.

She said Spaniola will introduce a bill to require inspection of new and used trailers at time of purchase and the creation of code which will identify the tanker's contents.

This would aid fire fighters, and would help police evacuate nearby persons if a tanker should ever collide, overturn or spill, she said.

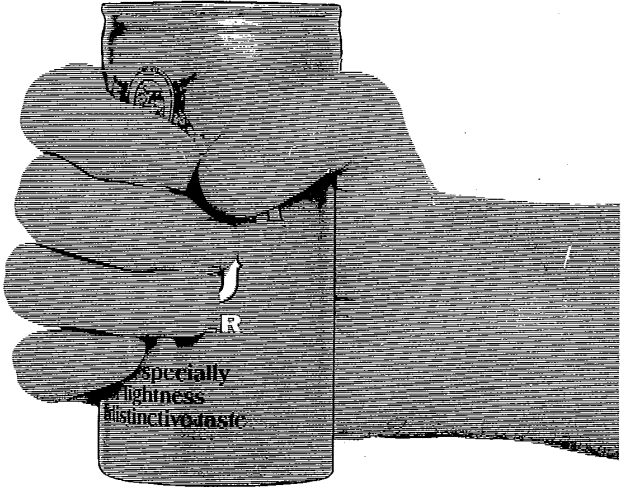
Ms. Eskelson added that the subcommittee was also considering recommending banning the tandem-tanker rigs from freeways during peak traffic hours. It had abandoned notions of barring them from expressways altogether, because it felt that was safer to have them there than on the state's secondary roads.

IN THE WAKE OF a rash of tanker accidents, critics have chided the legislature for neglecting the problem. However, in 1973 the legislature gave that responsibility to the PSC. Only four years later have the guidelines been forthcoming.

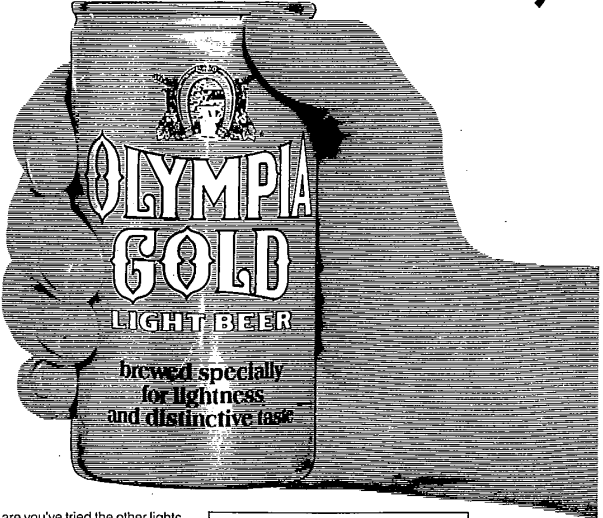
Crim, who has campaigned for the regulations, said "Why it has taken the PSC more than 3½ from the time the legislature gave them the authority, to issue the guidelines is a difficult thing for me to understand."

After several inquiries to the commission, Crim said he had been assured of expeditious action. "I began to wonder about the expeditious action," he concluded.

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