Inv-2154

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

WASHINGTON

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

ACCIDENT ON THE

ATLANTA, BIRMINGHAM & COAST RAILROAD

AND THE

LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD

HELENA, ALA.

MARCH 6, 1937

INVESTIGATION NO. 2154

SUMMARY

Inv-2154

Railroads:	Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast Railroad; Louisville & Nashville Railroad	
Date:	March 6, 1937	
Location:	Helena, Ala.	
Kind of accident:	Side collision	
Trains involved:	A. B. & C. R.R. Freight	: L.& N. R.R. : Freight
Train numbers:	No. 84	: Switch
Engine numbers:	210	: 1250
Consist:	45 cars, caboose	: 4 cars
Speed:	2-5 m.p.h.	: 2 - 6 m.p.h.
Track:	5° curve; grade level; Tangent; level	
Weather:	Clear	
Time:	9.25 a.m.	
Casualties:	1 killed; 1 injured	
Cause:	Failure properly to control speed of A.B.& C. train when approaching railroad crossing at grade.	

April 21, 1937.

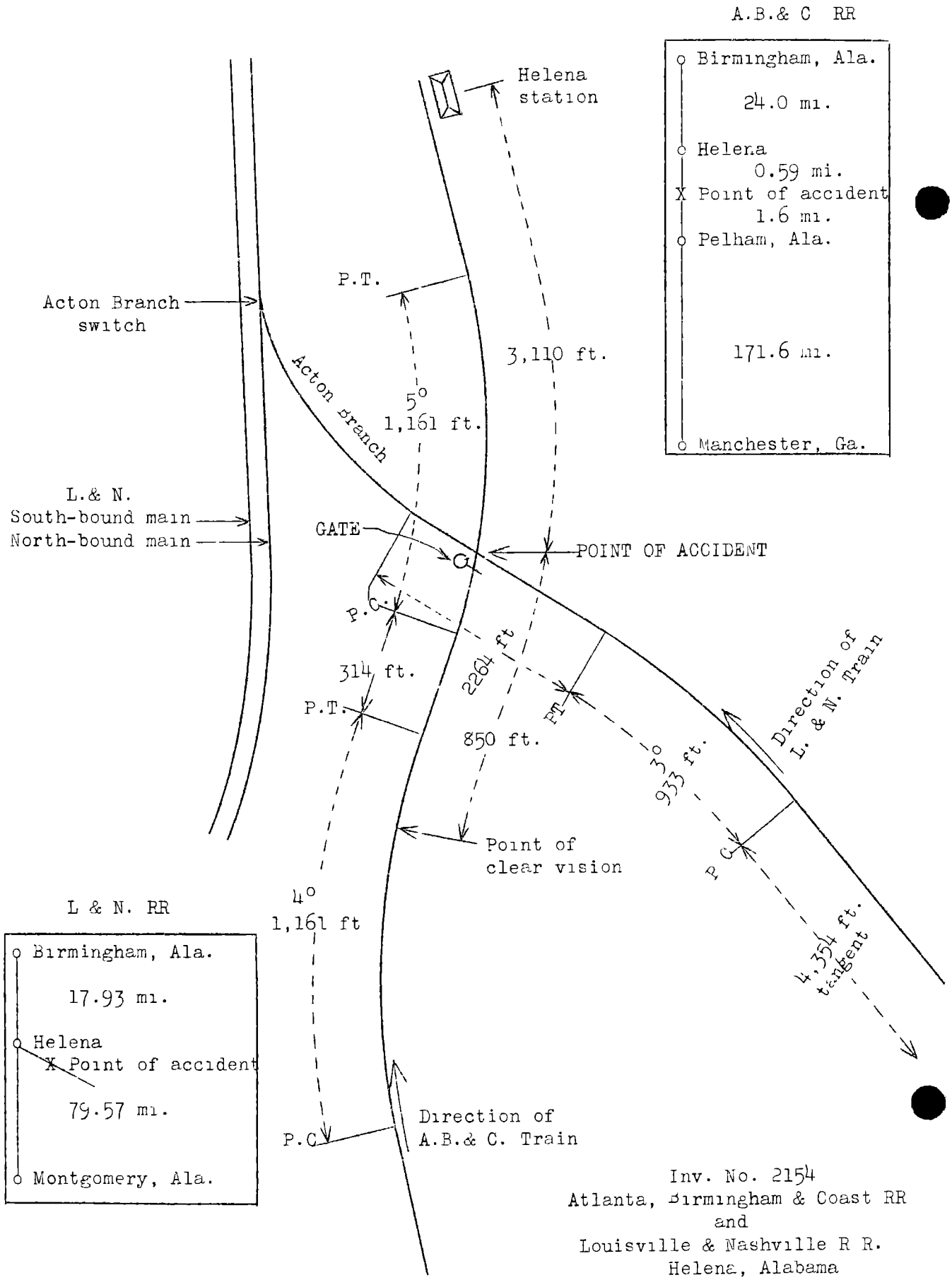
To the Commission:

On March 6, 1937, there was a side collision between a freight train of the Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast Railroad and a freight train of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, near Helena, Ala., which resulted in the death of 1 employee and the injury of 1 employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred at the intersection of the tracks of the Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast Railroad, hereinafter referred to as the A.B.& C., and the tracks of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, hereinafter referred to as the L.& N. The Elyton District, Birmingham Division, of the A.B.& C. extends between Birmingham and Lineville, Ala., a distance of 104.2 miles, and is a single track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. In the vicinity of the point of accident the main line of the L.& N. and the main line of the A.B.& C. parallel each other and extend north and south according to timetable directions, which are used in this report. The Acton Branch of the L.& N. is on that part of the Birmingham Division which extends between Birmingham and Montgomery, Ala., a distance of 97.5 miles. This branch leads from the northbound main track in a southeasterly direction, movements from main line on this branch being southbound. This branch crosses the main line of the A.B.& C. Elyton District at grade, at an angle of 62° 53', the crossing, known as Acton Crossing, being located 1,143 feet south of the L.& N. main track switch, and 3,110 feet south of the A.B.& C. station at Helena. The Acton Branch is an industrial spur track 8,325 feet in length, on which movements are made under protection of a flagman left at the main track junction switch.

Movements of trains over Acton Crossing are governed by a manually operated gate, which swings from a post located in the southwest angle of the crossing, about 6 feet from the track of each railroad. A sign about 16 inches in width and about 24 inches in length, with the word "STOP" on its face, is attached to this gate, and hangs directly above the center of the track. The normal position of the gate is across the L.& N.; at the time of the accident this gate was in position across the A.B.& C. track. In addition to the gate there is a stop board, 4 feet in height, on the east side of the A.B.& C. track, 90 feet south of the crossing, which governs northbound A.B.& C. trains.



Inv. No. 2154
Atlanta, Birmingham & Coast RR
and
Louisville & Nashville R R.
Helena, Alabama
March 6, 1937

Approaching the point of accident from the south, on the A.B.& C. the track is tangent for more than one-fourth mile, followed by a 4° curve to the right 1,161 feet in length, including spirals, then tangent for 314 feet, followed by a 5° curve to the left 1,161 feet in length, including spirals, the crossing on which the accident occurred being located on this curve 213 feet from its southern end. A side-hill cut, 18 feet in depth, on the right side of the track on the 4° curve, restricts the view of the crossing to a distance of 850 feet, from the engineman's side of a northbound train.

Approaching the point of accident from the south on the Acton Branch of the L.& N., the track is tangent for 4,354 feet, followed by a 3° curve to the left 933 feet in length, then tangent for 1,895 feet to the point of accident. At this point the grade on both railroads is level, the tracks being laid on a fill approximately 18 feet in height.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 9:25 a.m.

Description

Train No. 84 of the A.B.& C., a northbound second class freight train, consisted of 45 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 210, and was in charge of Conductor Blankenship and Engineman Burgess. This train left Manchester, Ga., its initial station, at 10:00 p.m. March 5, passed Pelham, Ala., the last open office, 1.6 miles south of the point of accident, at 9:19 a.m. March 6, according to the train sheet, 3 hours 29 minutes late, and while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 2 and 5 miles per hour, struck the tender of L.& N. engine 1250 which was passing over Acton Crossing. Northbound L.& N. engine 1250, headed north and shoving 4 loaded coal cars, was in charge of Conductor Wood and Engineman Smoot. After performing switching service on the Acton Branch this train was on its return trip to the main line and while traveling over Acton Crossing at a speed estimated to have been between 2 and 6 miles per hour, its tender was struck on the left side by the engine of A.B.& C. train No. 84.

L.& N. engine 1250 was overturned to the right and stopped on its right side on the bank of the fill, north of the crossing, and parallel to the L.& N. track; the tender stopped upside down behind the engine, both engine and tender being considerably damaged. The lead wheels of the first car ahead of the engine were derailed, but none of the cars was damaged. The front coupler of A.B.& C. engine 210 was broken, and the pilot and pilot step on the left side were slightly damaged.

The engine was not derailed, and stopped with the pilot near the north rail of the L.& N. track. No other cars of the A.B.& C. train were derailed or damaged, and there was no damage to the A.B.& C. track. One rail of the L.& N. track was overturned. The employee killed was the L.& N. engineman and the employee injured was the A.B.& C. engineman.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Burgess, of A.B.& C. train No. 84 stated that he had been on this run at intervals during the past ten or twelve years, the last time being for about 90 days. He had been off duty 36 hours prior to this trip, and on duty 12 hours at the time of the accident. The brakes were tested before leaving Manchester and were in perfect condition during the trip both before and after the accident, and he had had no trouble in handling the train from Manchester to the point of accident. The maximum speed of his train south of Acton Crossing was 25 miles per hour, and the train was traveling at that speed at the time he made a 10-pound brake pipe reduction at the whistle-board about one-half mile south of the crossing, this usually being sufficient to bring the train under control approaching the crossing, so that if necessary, a stop could be made before the crossing was reached. He said that in this case the brakes worked properly but he had not applied them soon enough the second time to make the stop. After rounding the curve approaching the crossing his vision was restricted to 13 or 14 car lengths, and he estimated the speed of his train when reaching that point to have been 15 miles per hour. When reaching a point where he could see the crossing, the gate was lined against his train, and the L.& N. train was about 6 feet from the crossing. He made an emergency application of the brakes as soon as he saw the L.& N. train and at the same time received a stop signal from the L.& N. brakeman which he did not answer because of his endeavor to stop his train. When about 6 or 8 car lengths from the crossing he reversed the engine, and opened the sanders, at which time the driving-wheels became locked. He was not sure that the sanders were working although he had had no previous trouble with them and he did not examine them after the accident, except to close the valves. He said that at least a minute elapsed from the time he rounded the curve until the L.& N. engine was struck, this occurring at 9:25 a.m., and he estimated the speed of that engine to have been about 3 miles per hour at the time. When about 4 car lengths from the crossing he realized he would not get his train stopped. He said that he usually passed over this crossing at a speed of about 7 or 8 miles per hour when everything is clear and the gate is lined against the L.& N.

He further stated that he was given an oral examination on the train rules in December, 1936.

Conductor Blankenship, of A.B.& C. train No. 84, corroborated the statement of Engineman Burgess in all essential facts. The approach to Acton Crossing on this trip was made in the usual manner and he had no reason to believe that the train would not be stopped if necessary. He said that the weather was clear and visibility was good. During the 3 or 4 months Engineman Burgess had been his engineman on this run he had stopped for railroad crossings and crossing signs in all previous instances where required.

The statements of Fireman Johnson, Flagman Smith, and Head-Brakeman Reeves, of A.B.& C. train No. 84, substantially corroborated those of Engineman Burgess and Conductor Blankenship, and added nothing of importance to the investigation.

General Foreman George, of the A.B.& C. at Birmingham, stated that, after the accident, engine 210 was thoroughly inspected and nothing was found wrong.

Fireman Purifier, of L.& N. engine 1250, stated that he was on the fireman's side of his engine at the time his train stopped for the brakeman to throw the crossing gate and he repeated the brakeman's proceed signal to the engineman, who answered it with two short blasts of the whistle. The bell was ringing at the time. After moving about 2 car lengths, at a speed of approximately 3 miles per hour, he saw the A.B.& C. train approaching 2 or 3 car lengths away and he called a warning to his engineman to get off, but he did not know whether the engineman heard him. Fireman Purifier did not see or hear the A.B.& C. train before his train started over the crossing, although he was standing in the left gangway; the other train appeared to be running about 2 or 3 miles per hour when it struck his train.

Conductor Wood, of L.& N. engine 1250, stated that after stopping at the crossing for the brakeman to line the gate, a proceed signal was received from the brakeman and the train started over the crossing at a speed of about 6 miles per hour, the head-brakeman getting on the head end of the forward car. The conductor was standing behind Engineman Smoot and did not hear the A.B.& C. train approaching until he heard the engineman of that train reverse his engine, at which time his own train had moved about 3 car lengths and he immediately called a warning to his engineman twice; his fireman gave a warning at about the same time.

Conductor Wood had noticed that the hearing of Engineman

Smoot was slightly defective and he did not believe that the engineman had heard the warnings given by himself and fireman. His engine was using steam and it did not appear that the engineman made any attempt to either increase speed or to stop his train after the warnings had been called. He further stated that the air brakes were cut in and working properly and that movements on the Acton Branch are made under the protection of a flagman left at the junction.

Flagman Johnson, of L.& N. engine 1250, stated that he was stationed about 30 car lengths from the point of accident, at the main line switch leading to the Acton Branch, and saw his train stop at the crossing; he also saw the A.B.& C. train when it was about 40 or 50 car lengths from the crossing and estimated its speed as being about 35 or 40 miles per hour at that time, but it had nearly stopped at the time the accident occurred. He heard its whistle when the train was slightly more than a mile from the point of accident, but did not hear the whistle blown while approaching the crossing.

Swing Brakeman Pigrom, of L.& N. engine 1250, stated that his train stopped with the head car 6 or 8 feet from the A.B.& C. crossing while he unlocked and swung the gate across the A.B.& C. track; he then signaled his engineman ahead, and about 2 cars had moved over the crossing when he saw the A.B.& C. train approaching at a speed of approximately 30 miles per hour, about 350 yards distant. He walked to a stop-board on the A.B.& C. track, and gave stop signals to the approaching train from the engineman's side. These signals were not answered, but the engine was reversed. The weather was clear at that time and the visibility was good.

Head Brakeman Shelton, of L.& N. engine 1250, stated that he was on the car next to the engine and when his train stopped for the crossing he got on the leading car and was in that position when his train started over the crossing; after proceeding about 2 car lengths at a speed of between 3 and 5 miles per hour he saw the A.B.& C. train rounding the curve about 15 or 20 car lengths from the crossing, at which time it appeared to be running 25 or 30 miles per hour. He thought the speed had been reduced to about 5 miles per hour when the accident occurred. From Brakeman Shelton's position on the leading car he was in plain view of his engineman, and when the A.B.& C. train was seen approaching he gave his engineman a proceed signal, and Brakeman Pigrom called to the fireman to come on. He said his engineman was on the seat box, apparently with his hand on the throttle, and seemed to be reaching for the brake; the engine was working steam at the time.

Discussion

The investigation disclosed that the L.& N. train stopped clear of Acton Crossing and a member of the crew lined the gate across the A.B.& C. track, none of the crew having seen or heard the A.B.& C. train approaching before the movement over the crossing was started; after this train had started over the crossing, both L.& N. brakemen saw the A.B.& C. train approaching and at once gave stop signals to the engineman of that train, one of the brakemen going 90 feet in the direction of the A.B.& C. train, giving stop signals as he advanced.

Engineman Burgess of train No. 84 had experienced no previous difficulty in controlling his train and stated that in this case the brakes worked properly but he had not started braking in time to make the stop. He approached the crossing at a speed of about 15 miles per hour and when it became visible about 13 or 14 car lengths away, the gate was lined against his train and he immediately applied the brakes in emergency but was unable to stop before fouling the crossing; from this it is apparent that he was not approaching the crossing prepared to stop as required by rule.

Section 9953, of the code of Alabama, reads in part as follows:

> "DUTY AS TO RAILROAD CROSSINGS: When the tracks of two railroads cross each other at grade, engineers and conductors must cause the trains of which they are in charge to come to a full stop within one hundred feet of such crossing, and not proceed until they know the way to be clear, the train on the railroad having the older right of way being entitled to cross first; but the provisions of this section shall not be applicable where crossings of such roads are regulated by interlocking crossing or derailing switches, or other safety appliances of like kind to prevent collisions at crossings, and such flagman or watchman signals that the train may cross in safety."

Under Special Instructions in the A.B.& C. timetable the following appears:

RAILROAD CROSSINGS

"L.& N. crossing at Acton is protected by a gate located on the west side of our main line,

the normal position of which is clear for A.B.& C. trains, permitting them to move over the crossing without stopping, except when being used by L.& N. trains. All trains must approach this crossing prepared to stop, and proceed under control until it can be plainly seen that the crossing is clear."

Conclusion

This accident was caused by failure properly to control the speed of A.B.& C. train No. 84 approaching a railroad crossing at grade.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON,

Director.