

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

INVESTIGATION NO. 2816
THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY
REPORT IN RE ACCIDENT
AT TOWNER, N. DAK., ON
AUGUST 15, 1944

SUMMARY

Railroad: Great Northern
Date: August 15, 1944
Location: Towner, N. Dak.
Kind of accident: Collision
Equipment involved: Passenger train : Motor-truck
Train number: First 1 :
Engine number: 2578 :
Consist: 15 cars :
Estimated speed: 55 m. p. h. : 5 m. p. h.
Operation: Timetable and train orders
Track: Single; tangent; 0.20 percent
ascending grade westward
Highway: Tangent; crosses track at angle
of 76°35'; practically level
Weather: Clear
Time: 10:10 p. m.
Casualties: 3 killed; 68 injured
Cause: Motor-truck being driven upon
street grade crossing immedi-
ately in front of approaching
train

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

INVESTIGATION NO. 2816

IN THE MATTER OF MAKING ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION REPORTS
UNDER THE ACCIDENT REPORTS ACT OF MAY 6, 1910.

THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY COMPANY

September 16, 1944.

Accident at Towner, N. Dak., on August 15, 1944, caused
by a motor-truck being driven upon a street grade
crossing immediately in front of an approaching train.

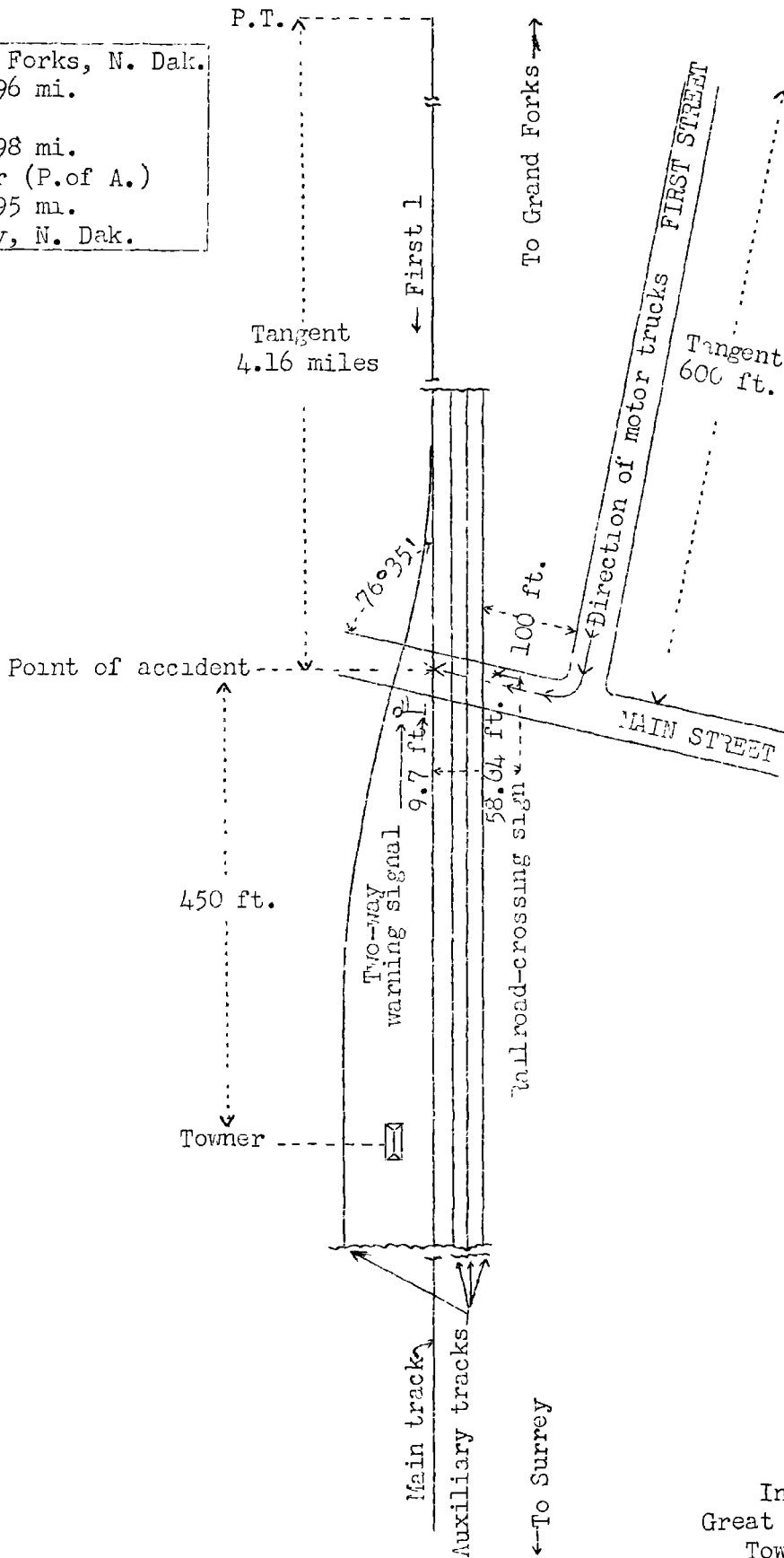
REPORT OF THE COMMISSION¹

PATTERSON, Chairman:

On August 15, 1944, there was a collision between a passenger train on the Great Northern Railway and a motor-truck at a street grade crossing at Towner, N. Dak., which resulted in the death of the driver of the motor-truck and 2 train-service employees, and the injury of 62 passengers, 1 Pullman employee and 5 dining-car employees.

¹Under authority of section 17 (2) of the Interstate Commerce Act the above-entitled proceeding was referred by the Commission to Chairman Patterson for consideration and disposition.

- o Grand Forks, N. Dak. 145.96 mi.
- o Rugby 18.98 mi.
- X Towner (P. of A.) 34.95 mi.
- o Surrey, N. Dak.



Inv. No. 2816
 Great Northern Railway
 Towner, N. Dak.
 August 15, 1944

Location of Accident and Method of Operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Dakota Division designated as the Fifth Subdivision and extending westward from Grand Forks to Surrey, N. Dak., 199.89 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this was a single-track line over which trains were operated by timetable and train orders. There was no block system in use. The accident occurred 134.94 miles west of Grand Forks, at a point 450 feet east of the station at Towner, where the railroad was crossed at grade by Main Street. The main track was tangent throughout a distance of 4.16 miles east of this point and a considerable distance westward. The grade for west-bound trains was 0.20 percent ascending.

In the vicinity of the point of accident First Street was practically parallel to the railroad on the south, and at a point about 100 feet south of the grade crossing it intersected Main Street, which crossed the railroad at an angle of $76^{\circ}35'$. From the east on First Street and thence northward on Main Street, there were, in succession, a tangent about 600 feet to Main Street, a sharp curve to the right, and a tangent 100 feet to the crossing and some distance beyond. From the intersection to the crossing the grade for north-bound vehicles was slightly ascending. At the crossing there were three auxiliary tracks south and one auxiliary track north of the main track. South of the crossing, Main Street was surfaced with gravel to a width of about 60 feet. The crossing was 32 feet wide, and the distance from the most southerly rail to the most northerly was about 70 feet, and the distance from the most southerly rail to the south rail of the main track was about 40 feet. The area between the rails of each track was surfaced with planks, and there was one 12-inch plank outside each rail. The remainder of the surface of the crossing was surfaced with gravel.

A standard cross-buck railroad-crossing sign was located to the right of the direction of north-bound traffic, 58.64 feet south of the center-line of the main track and 22.5 feet east of the center-line of Main Street. This sign was mounted on a mast and bore the words "RAILROAD CROSSING" in black letters on a white background. An automatic two-way warning signal was located to the left of the direction of north-bound traffic, 9.7 feet north of the center-line of the main track and 41.5 feet west of the center-line of Main Street. On the mast of this signal an electrically-lighted sign 8 inches by 31 inches was mounted 11.5 feet above the level of the street, and bore the word "DANGER" in red letters. A bell 12 inches in diameter was mounted on top of the mast 13.2 feet above the level of the street. The letters of the sign were illuminated and the bell sounded when a west-bound train occupied any portion of the track throughout a distance of 2,500 feet immediately east of the crossing.

Operating rules read in part as follows:

14. ENGINE WHISTLE SIGNALS.

Note.--The signals prescribed are illustrated by "o" for short sounds: "___" for longer sounds.
* * *

Sound. Indication.

* * *

(1) ___ ___ o ___ Approaching public crossings at grade. To be prolonged or repeated until the engine has passed over the crossing.

* * *

The motor vehicle and traffic laws of North Dakota read in part as follows:

OPERATION OF VEHICLES--RULES OF THE ROAD

* * *

5. * * *

Whenever any person driving a vehicle approaches a highway and interurban or steam railway grade crossing and a clearly visible and positive signal gives warning of the immediate approach of a railway train or car, it shall be unlawful for the driver of the vehicle to fail to bring the vehicle to a complete stop before traversing such grade crossing. * * *

* * *

The maximum authorized speed for passenger trains was 60 miles per hour.

Description of Accident

First 1, a west-bound first-class passenger train, consisted of engine 2578, 2 Pullman troop sleeping cars, 1 Pullman kitchen car, 1 Pullman troop sleeping car, 1 Pullman tourist car, 1 dormitory car, 2 Pullman tourist cars, 1 Pullman sleeping car, 1 dining car and 5 Pullman sleeping cars, in the order named. The sixth car was of steel-underframe construction and the remainder were of all-steel construction. This train departed from Rugby, 18.98 miles east of Towner and the last open office, at 9:48 p. m., 35 minutes late, and while moving at an

estimated speed of 55 miles per hour it struck a motor-truck on a street grade crossing 450 feet east of the station at Towner.

The vehicles involved were a motor-truck and a tractor and semi-trailer, owned by the Farmers Union Central Exchange, Inc., Minot, N. Dak. Because the motor of the tractor was inoperative, the tractor and semi-trailer were being towed by the motor-truck. The driver of the motor-truck, who was the sole occupant, held North Dakota operator's license No. 7391. The motor-truck was a 3-ton, 1937 International, 6-cylinder model, and bore Montana license No. 3-1069. It weighed 13,620 pounds and was equipped with dual rear wheels, hydraulic brakes with a vacuum booster, an enclosed steel cab and a steel tank, the capacity of which was 2,500 gallons. Its total length was 27 feet. The driver of the tractor and semi-trailer was occupying the cab of the tractor, and he was killed in the accident. The tractor was a 2-ton, 1937 International, 6-cylinder model, and bore Montana license No. C-765. It was equipped with dual rear wheels, hydraulic brakes and an enclosed steel cab. The semi-trailer was a Fruehauf Class 571 model, equipped with dual rear wheels, vacuum booster brakes and a steel tank. Its total weight was 36,000 pounds. The overall length of the tractor and semi-trailer was 43 feet. At the time of the accident the tank of the motor-truck was empty, and the cargo of the tractor and semi-trailer consisted of 3,600 gallons of gasoline. The motor-truck and the tractor and semi-trailer, in the order named, moved westward on First Street, turned sharply to the right on Main Street and while moving northward at an estimated speed of 5 miles per hour it proceeded upon the crossing where the tractor and semi-trailer was struck by First 1.

Because of buildings adjacent to the track and cars standing on the auxiliary tracks at the time of the accident, a west-bound train approaching on the railroad could not be seen by the driver of a north-bound vehicle until the vehicle was within 24 feet of the south rail of the main track, then an unobstructed view could be had a distance of about 2 miles.

The tractor and semi-trailer were demolished. The tank was punctured, and escaping gasoline became ignited. First 1 was not derailed, and it stopped with the front end of the engine 3,034 feet west of the crossing. The front end of the engine was damaged in the collision, and the engine was considerably damaged by fire. The first five cars were slightly damaged by fire.

It was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 10:10 p. m.

The engineer and the fireman were killed.

During the 30-day period preceding the day of the accident, the average daily movement of trains over the crossing was 9.46. During the 24-hour period beginning at 7 a. m., August 18, 1944,

363 automobiles, 129 trucks, 18 horse-drawn vehicles and 14 trains passed over the crossing. Twenty-seven of the trucks were loaded with inflammables.

Discussion

First 1 was approaching the crossing at a speed of about 55 miles per hour in territory where the maximum authorized speed was 60 miles per hour. The headlight was lighted brightly. The air brakes had functioned properly en route. The whistle signal for the crossing was sounded in compliance with the rules. There was no application of the brakes immediately prior to the accident. It could not be determined when the enginemen first became aware that the motor-truck had entered upon the crossing, as they were killed in the accident.

The driver of the motor-truck was an experienced driver, but he had not made a trip over this crossing during a period of about 2 years prior to the accident. He had arranged with the driver of another motor-truck to precede his truck and to direct him to a gasoline station north of the track, where the vehicle being towed was to be taken. He said that he stopped his motor-truck just south of the crossing, then operated it over the crossing at a speed of about 5 miles per hour. His attention was being given to the movement of the preceding motor-truck, and he did not see or hear the approaching train until the accident occurred. He did not see or hear the automatic warning signal prior to the accident. The window of the cab in the direction of the approaching train was closed and the window on the other side was open. Witnesses who were in the vicinity of the crossing said that the warning sign was illuminated and the warning bell was ringing when the truck was approaching the crossing. The sign was visible and the bell was audible a considerable distance, and the weather was clear.

Cause

It is found that this accident was caused by a motor-truck entering upon a street grade crossing immediately in front of an approaching train.

Dated at Washington, D. C., this sixteenth day of September, 1944.

By the Commission, Chairman Patterson.

(SEAL)

W. P. BARTEL,
Secretary.