

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR
BUREAU OF SAFETY

ACCIDENT ON THE
GULF COAST LINES
OF THE
MISSOURI PACIFIC LINES

ALAMO, TEXAS

MARCH 14, 1940

INVESTIGATION NO. 2419

SUMMARY

Inv-2419

Railroad: Gulf Coast Lines
Date: March 14, 1940
Location: Alamo, Texas
Kind of accident: Collision at highway grade-crossing
Equipment involved: Passenger train : Motor-truck
Train number: 113
Engine number: 351
Consist: 6 cars
Speed: 45 m. p. h. : 15-20 m. p. h.
Operation: Timetable and train orders
Track: Single; tangent; practically level
Highway: Tangent; crosses track practically
at right angles
Weather: Slightly cloudy
Time: 8:06 a. m.
Casualties: 29 killed, 15 injured
Cause: Motor-truck driven upon highway
crossing at grade immediately
in front of approaching train.

May 13, 1940.

To the Commission:

On March 14, 1940, there was a collision between a passenger train and a motor-truck on the Gulf Coast Lines, of the Missouri Pacific Lines, at a highway grade-crossing at Alamo, Texas, which resulted in the death of 29 persons and the injury of 15 persons.

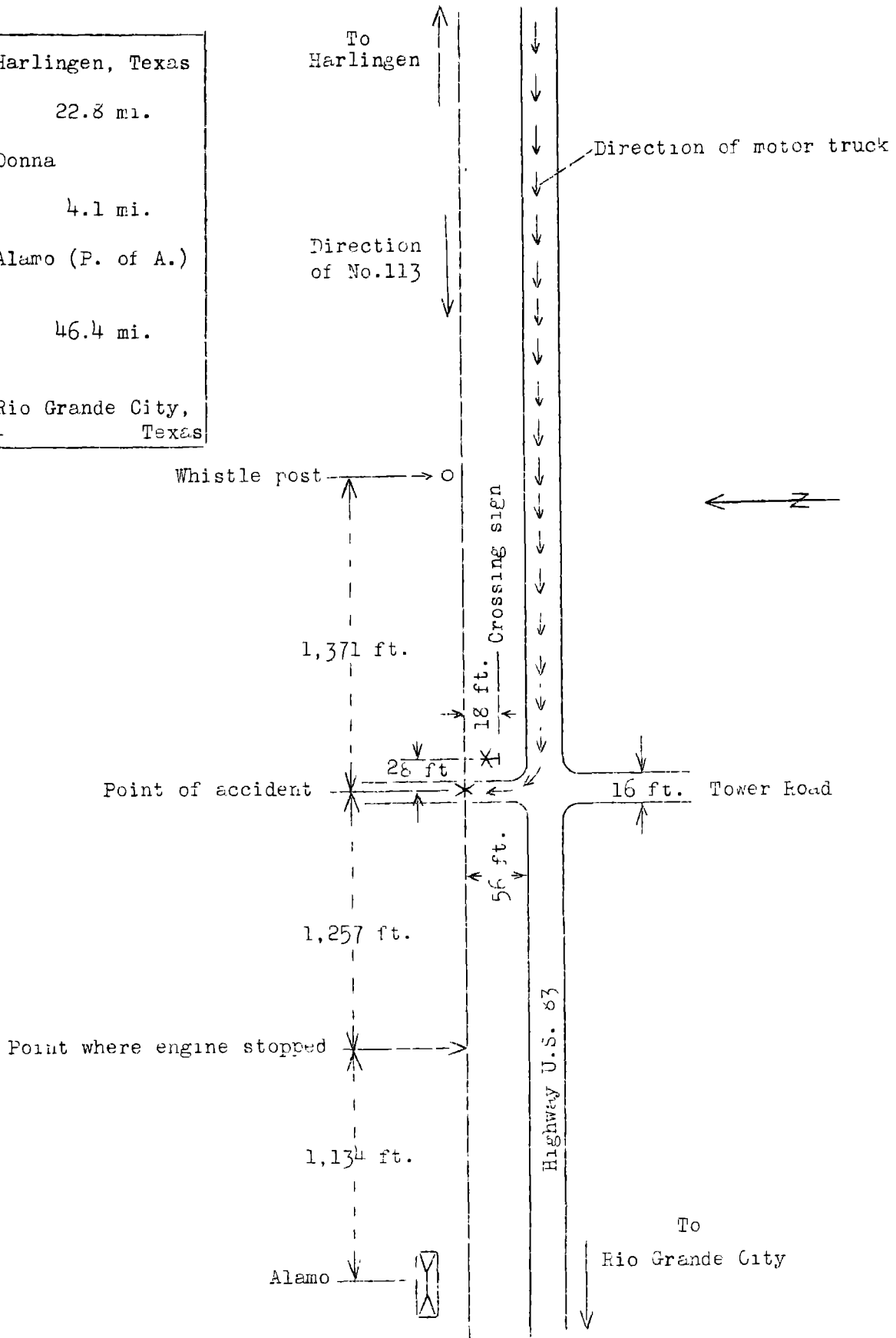
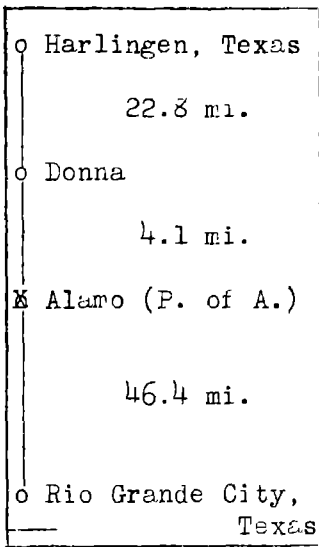
Location and Method of Operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Kingsville Division designated as the Mission District which extends between Harlingen and Rio Grande City, Texas, a distance of 73.3 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders; there is no block system in use. At the intersection involved the railroad extends east and west; the highway extends north and south and crosses the track almost at right angles. Time-table directions are north and south; however, compass directions are used in this report. The accident occurred at a point 2,391 feet east of the station at Alamo, where Tower Road crosses the track. Approaching on the railroad from the east the track is tangent for several miles to the crossing and several miles beyond. The grade is practically level.

Highway U. S. 83 parallels the track on the south a distance of several miles to the crossing and beyond. The distance from the north edge of the highway to the south edge of the track is about 56 feet. Tower Road, which intersects Highway U. S. 83 and the railroad at an angle of $92^{\circ}44'$, is paved with a top surface of asphalt, is 16 feet wide, and has gravel shoulders. From the north edge of Highway U. S. 83 to the center-line of the main track, Tower Road rises 1 foot 4 inches in a distance of 56 feet. Four planks, one on each side of each rail, are located at this crossing; these planks are 18 feet long and 10 inches wide. The area between the two inside planks is surfaced with asphalt.

Approaching from the south the crossing is protected by a standard cross-bar sign 10 feet above the surface of the ground and located 20 feet east of the center-line of Tower Road and 18 feet south of the center-line of the track; this sign bears the words "RAILROAD CROSSING," in black letters.

From a north-bound highway vehicle the view of the railroad to the east was unobstructed. From a west-bound engine the view of the crossing, that portion of Tower Road from the intersection of the two highways to the crossing, and Highway U. S. 83 was unobstructed.



Inv. No. 2419
Gulf Coast Lines of the Missouri Pacific Lines
Alamo, Texas
March 14, 1940

Rule 14(1) of the operating rules provides that when a train approaches a public crossing at grade two long blasts, one short blast, and one long blast of the engine whistle shall be sounded and shall be prolonged or repeated until the crossing is occupied by engine or car.

A whistle post for west-bound trains is located 1,371 feet east of the crossing.

The maximum authorized speed for passenger trains is 45 miles per hour.

The weather was slightly cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred at 8:06 a. m.

Description

No. 113, a south-bound passenger train, according to time-table directions but west-bound according to compass directions, with Conductor Waite and Engineman Wilson in charge, consisted of IGN engine 351, two baggage cars, one baggage-express car, one mail-express car, one coach and one Pullman sleeping car, in the order named; all cars were of steel construction. This train departed from Harlingen, 26.9 miles east of Alamo, at 7:10 a. m., according to the train sheet, on time, departed from Donna, 4.1 miles east of Alamo, at 8:01 a. m., 1 minute late, and, when approaching Alamo and while moving at a speed estimated at 45 miles per hour, struck a motor-truck.

The motor-truck involved was a 1938 model D-30, 6 cylinder, 1-1/2-ton International truck, and was owned and driven by Jose Ramon, of Garcino, Texas. This truck proceeded westward on Highway U. S. 83, turned northward on Tower Road, moved upon the crossing at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour, and was struck by No. 113. The truck was equipped with dual rear wheels, a closed cab, and hydraulic brakes. The length of the wheel base was 155 inches and the overall length was 244-7/16 inches. The windshield consisted of two sections of glass; each section was 22 inches long and 14 inches high. The windows in each cab-door were 15 inches high, 17 inches wide at the top, and 24 inches wide at the bottom. The body of the truck was about 14 feet long, 7 feet wide and 4 feet high, and was constructed of wood. At the time of the accident 44 persons were in the body and cab of the truck.

No. 113 struck the motor-truck at the right cab-door. The truck burst into flames and was carried in front of the engine 1,257 feet to the point where the engine stopped. Wreckage from the truck, and the occupants of the truck, were strewn

along the track throughout this distance. The truck was practically demolished; there was slight damage to engine 351.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Wilson stated that an air-brake test was made at Harlingen and the brakes functioned properly en route. As the train approached Tower Road crossing the engine bell was ringing and he sounded the regulation crossing whistle-signal; the last blast was prolonged until the engine reached the crossing. He estimated that the speed was 45 miles per hour and, as he was sounding the last long blast of the whistle, the fireman warned him of a truck approaching the crossing; immediately afterward the collision occurred. He shut off steam and applied the brakes in emergency. He said the train stopped about 1,200 feet west of the crossing. The weather was slightly cloudy but visibility was good at the time of the accident, which occurred at 8:06 or 8:07 a. m.

Fireman Garrett stated that an air-brake test was made at Harlingen and that the brakes functioned properly en route. When the train was about 1/4 mile east of Alamo the regulation crossing whistle was sounded and the engine bell was ringing. When his engine was about 50 or 60 feet from the crossing and while it was moving at a speed of 45 miles per hour he saw a truck turn from Highway U. S. 83 and approach the crossing at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour. He immediately warned the engineman, who was still sounding the crossing whistle-signal; the brakes were applied immediately in emergency and then the accident occurred. He said that the engine struck the truck at the right cab-door. He was positive that the window in that door was closed and that the cab was crowded with persons. Some sort of covering was over the body of the truck. He said the view of the crossing was unobstructed.

Conductor Waite stated that his train was approaching Alamo at a speed of 45 miles per hour. He was in the fifth car and his first knowledge of anything being wrong was when he felt the brakes being applied in emergency. The accident occurred at 8:06 a. m. He said that from the highway the view of the railroad to the east was unobstructed.

Brakeman Jones stated that the usual air-brake test was made at Harlingen and that the brakes functioned properly en route. Approaching Alamo the engine whistle was being sounded. He said the accident occurred at 8:06 a. m.

The statements of Brakeman Coleman, Messenger-Baggage-man McNeill, and Express Helpers Schuh and Sandhop added nothing of importance.

Roadmaster Stucky was in the rear end of the sixth car when No. 113 approached Alamo; he was not positive that he heard the engine whistle sounded.

Agent Reed, who was on duty at Alamo station, stated that he heard the crossing whistle-signal sounded by No. 113.

Car Inspector Neely stated that at Harlingen he tested the air brakes on No. 113 and found them in good operative condition.

Mechanical Foreman Schulke stated that after the accident he inspected engine 351 and found the right sill-step of the pilot broken, the left sill-step of the pilot bent, the left injector feed-pipe damaged, and the uncoupling lever on the pilot beam broken. No defect on any car was found and the brakes were in good condition.

Eight residents who were in the vicinity of the crossing involved stated that No. 113 sounded the whistle signal for the crossing.

George Ingram, Deputy Sheriff, stated that he examined the highway approach to Alamo crossing and did not observe any skid mark that would indicate the brakes on the truck had been applied. He thought the truck driver had not used the brakes near the crossing involved.

Captain Rose, of the Texas Highway Patrol, stated that he examined the truck after the accident. It was equipped with a rear-view mirror mounted on a 2-foot extension-irer to the left of the driver. The window-lift mechanism indicated that both windows were up at the time of the accident. He said that the driver of the truck had a Class P chauffeur's license which indicated that the driver's eyesight had been tested, that he had passed an examination on driving regulations, and that he had passed a driving examination in the vehicle which he was licensed to drive. He stated that there is no law in the state of Texas requiring a motor vehicle to be stopped before crossing a railroad.

E. L. Simms, of Harlingen, stated that he was driving his car on Highway U. S. 83 at a speed of 40 or 45 miles per hour and was just a short distance to the rear of No. 113, which was moving at the same speed. As he approached Alamo he saw an automobile and a truck ahead of him and both appeared to be moving at a speed of 40 or 45 miles per hour. He heard the locomotive whistle sounded several times for the crossing and then saw the truck turn from the highway and drive directly in front of the approaching train.

G. W. Cook, of Alamo, stated that he was driving his truck west on Highway U. S. 83 and saw the truck involved drive in front of the approaching train without slowing down.

Julio Garcia, Adolfo Garcia, and Tibucio Zarate, occupants of the motor-truck involved, stated that the top of the body of the truck was covered with a tarpaulin. They did not know how many persons were on the truck; however, two persons were in the cab with the driver. These witnesses were sitting on the floor of the truck body, and because of the tarpaulin covering the sides of the truck they could see only through the rear end. They did not see the train but they heard the noise made by its wheels; they did not hear the whistle sounded. They did not think the truck was moving rapidly when it made the turn into Tower Road, and they felt the brakes being applied lightly just before the collision occurred.

Assistant District Attorney Ross stated that papers found in the clothing of the truck driver identified him as the owner and a licensed driver of the truck.

Law Enforcement Officer and Chief of Inspectors Hood, of the Motor Transportation Division of the Railroad Commission of Texas, stated that Jose Ramon was engaged in contracting labor for fruit and vegetable farms. He said numerous persons in this locality were so employed, and as a result large groups of persons were transported in a highly dangerous manner; however, since no charge is made for this transportation the operation of trucks for this purpose does not violate the motor carrier law or the motor bus law of the state of Texas.

According to data furnished by the carrier, the average daily movement of trains over the crossing involved was 7.6 trains.

Observations of the Commission's Inspectors

The Commission's inspectors observed that during a 24-hour period 867 motor vehicles used the crossing involved. Many of the trucks were loaded to capacity with laborers.

Discussion

According to the evidence, as No. 113 approached Alamo at a speed of 45 miles per hour, the engine bell was ringing and the crossing whistle-signal was being sounded. When the train was about 60 feet from the crossing the fireman warned the engineman that a truck was approaching; the engineman immediately shut off steam and applied the air brakes in emergency, but the collision occurred almost instantly. The engine stopped 1,257 feet west of the crossing.

The motor-truck proceeded westward several miles on a highway parallel to the railroad track and then turned northward into Tower Road at a point 56 feet south of the crossing and was moving at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour when it was struck by No. 113.

The crossing was protected by a standard cross-buck sign. There was nothing to obstruct the driver's view of the train approaching from the east, and the visual conditions were good. The evidence indicated that there were two persons besides the driver in the cab of the truck and that both cab windows were closed. There were 41 persons in the truck body. Because of a tarpaulin over the top and the sides of the truck body these persons could not see in any direction except through the rear end. Three occupants of the body of the truck said they had no warning of the accident. Why the driver failed to observe the approaching train is not known as he was killed in the accident.

Conclusion

This accident was caused by a motor-truck being driven upon a highway grade crossing immediately in front of an approaching train.

Respectfully submitted,

S. N. MILLS,

Director.