

1934

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING AN
ACCIDENT ON THE MICHIGAN CENTRAL RAILROAD AT VERMONTVILLE,
MICH., ON AUGUST 10, 1934.

September 14, 1934.

To the Commission:

On August 10, 1934, at Vermontville, Mich., a passenger train on the Michigan Central Railroad struck an automobile at a grade crossing and was derailed, resulting in the death of 4 occupants of the automobile and 1 trespasser, and the injury of 5 passengers, 2 employees and 1 trespasser.

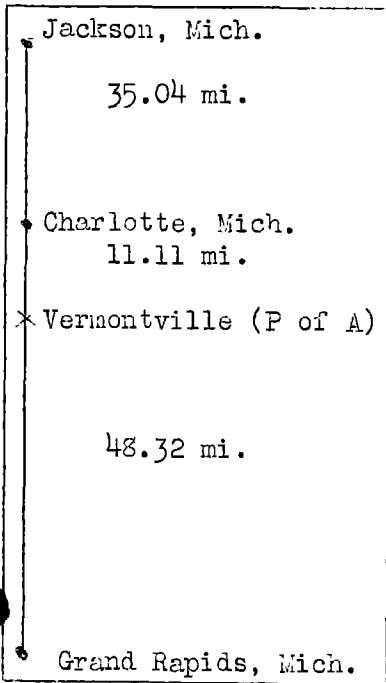
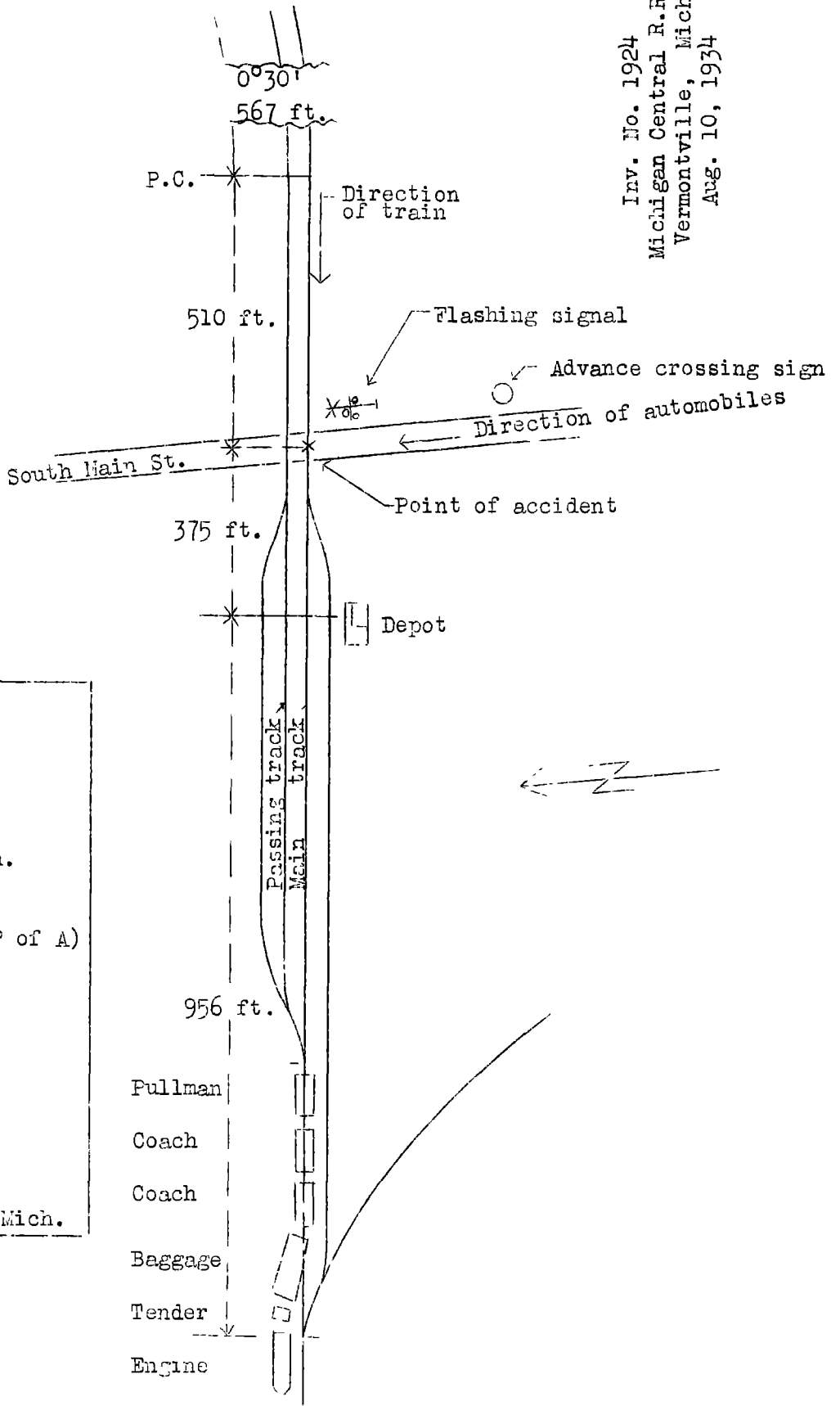
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Grand Rapids Branch of the Michigan Division, extending between Jackson and Grand Rapids, Mich., a distance of 94.47 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. The accident occurred 375 feet east of the depot where South Main Street crosses the main line and a passing track; approaching from the east, the track is tangent for 1,762 feet, followed by a $0^{\circ}30'$ curve to the right 567 feet in length and then tangent track a distance of 510 feet to the crossing and for a considerable distance beyond that point. The grade is practically level at the crossing.

The highway crosses the tracks almost at right angles, from south to north, it passes over first the main track and then the passing track. The crossing is protected on each side of the tracks by an advance crossing signal of the disk type with reflex buttons, and also by a flashing light signal; on the south side of the track the advance crossing sign is located on the east side of the highway about 360 feet from the crossing, while the flashing light signal, cross-bar sign and bell, all located on the same mast, are also on the east side of the highway and immediately south of the crossing. There is also an overhead electric street light located 40 feet south of the crossing. The grade for north-bound vehicular traffic is practically level to and over the crossing. The highway is of gravel construction, fairly wide and maintained in good condition.

When a north-bound automobile reaches a point 415 feet from the track an approaching west-bound train can be seen for a dis-

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tance of $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, and then the view of the automobile driver is obstructed by trees and brush until within about 75 feet of the track, from which point an unobstructed view of a train can be had for 960 feet.

The weather was clear and it was dark at the time of the accident, which occurred about 7:20 p.m.

Description

West-bound passenger Train No. 109 consisted of 1 baggage car, 2 coaches and 1 Pullman parlor car, in the order named, hauled by engine 8520, and was in charge of Conductor Bell and Engineman Howland. The first car was of steel-underframe construction, while the others were of all-steel construction. This train left Charlotte, 11.11 miles east of Vermontville, at 7:08 p.m., according to the train sheet, 8 minutes late, and struck the automobile at the crossing at Vermontville while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 50 and 60 miles per hour.

The automobile struck by the train was a 1927 Pontiac sedan, operated by Dale McClintock, Charlotte, Mich., who was accompanied by three passengers. The automobile, proceeding northward on the highway, stopped just south of the crossing, and while standing at this point, waiting for the train to pass, it was struck in the rear by a north-bound 1926 Chevrolet coach, operated by George H. Swift, of Vermontville, Mich., and was knocked upon the track, just to the right of the crossing and 17 feet from where it had been standing, directly in front of the approaching train.

The automobile, which was practically demolished, was carried on the pilot of the engine a distance of about 1,000 feet to the frog of the west switch of the passing track, a trailing-point switch for west-bound trains, following which the track was completely torn up for a distance of about 331 feet to the west house-track switch, where the engine went down a 10-foot fill on the north side of the track and stopped bottom up, with the tender behind the engine. All of the cars were derailed, but they remained upright on the roadbed. Flange marks appeared on the north side of each rail starting at a point 24 feet west of the center line of the crossing, marking tie plates and spike heads until the frog of the west switch of the passing track was reached. The employees injured were the engineman and fireman.

Summary of evidence

On account of injuries which they received, Engineman Howland and Fireman Dennis were not interrogated. Conductor

Bell, however, stated that immediately after the accident he talked with the engineman and was told by him that as the train approached the crossing he saw an automobile standing immediately south of the track, as though waiting for the train to pass; just before the train reached the crossing the automobile suddenly darted upon the track directly in front of the engine; the engineman applied the air brakes in emergency, the derailment occurring immediately afterwards. Conductor Bell was in the second car at the time of the accident and the first he knew of anything wrong was when the air brakes were applied in emergency; he estimated the speed to have been about 60 miles per hour. After the accident the flashing lights at the crossing were working and at that time the driver of the automobile that struck the standing automobile told him that no tail light was burning on the standing car and that he did not see that car ahead of him until his own car struck it.

Harry S. Power, a trespasser, was riding on the back end of the tender, facing south; two other trespassers, one of whom was killed in the accident, also were riding on the tender. Mr. Power said that when in the vicinity of the whistling post the engineman sounded the regular crossing whistle signal, following which another whistle signal was sounded. He saw the automobile standing just south of the crossing and just before the engine reached the crossing the automobile suddenly moved upon the track directly in front of the train. Thomas L. Myers, the other surviving trespasser, added that the headlight on the engine was burning brightly, that the engine bell was ringing, and that the engineman sounded an alarm signal on the whistle just before the automobile was struck.

George H. Swift, 23 years old, owner and operator of the Chevrolet coach that struck the rear of the Pontiac sedan, stated that he is a farm hand. Accompanied by two other young men, Cecil R. Root and Morris Allen Hummel, he was driving northward on South Main Street, traveling at the rate of about 10 miles per hour, with the headlights on his car burning dimly; on reaching a point about 10 rods south of the crossing he saw the flashing lights of the crossing signal and reduced speed to about 4 or 5 miles per hour. He did not see the automobile ahead, standing near the center of the road and about 10 feet south of the crossing, until his own car was about 3 feet from it, saying that no tail light was burning on that car. His car struck the rear of the standing car and knocked it upon the track directly in front of the fast approaching passenger train, when the engine was about 50 feet east of the crossing. He thought the automobile ahead had just stopped at the crossing; he was familiar with the crossing. He said the brakes on his car were in good condition, and that he could have stopped without difficulty had he seen the

car at the time he first saw the flashing lights. He did not carry insurance on his car.

Cecil P. Root, age 19, stated that he was riding on the front seat of the car and that their speed was not very high. The flashing lights were working and as their automobile neared the crossing it seemed as though the speed was reduced. He did not see the automobile standing at the crossing, however, until just after the right front fender of their car struck its left rear fender, knocking that car upon the track. The engine bell was ringing, as was also the crossing bell. He did not know whether there was a tail light burning on the standing automobile, but said that he did not notice any tail light.

Morris Allen Hummel, age 18, was lying down on the rear seat of the car driven by Swift, partly asleep, and was unaware of anything wrong until he was knocked off the rear seat and struck the front seat, bruising his chest, and he did not know what had happened until after the accident occurred.

William D. Southern, Jr., a resident of Vermontville, Mich., stated that he and his wife were proceeding northward in their automobile on South Main Street at a speed of between 20 and 25 miles per hour and two automobiles traveling in the same direction passed his car when it was from 1,000 to 1,500 feet south of the crossing. Both of the other cars were traveling just fast enough to overtake his own car and the second car of these two cars then overtook and passed the first car. He thought he observed the flashing lights at the crossing just before these two cars passed him and he also said the usual engine whistle signal was sounded, the headlight of the engine was burning, and the crossing bell was ringing as the train approached. When his own car reached a point about 100 feet from the crossing the car nearest the crossing suddenly shot ahead upon the track and was struck by the train. He did not know whether the tail lights were burning on either of the two automobiles ahead of him.

Signal Maintainer McKeough arrived at the scene of the accident within 1½ hours after its occurrence, at which time the flashing lights and crossing bell were still in operation due to the track circuit being broken as a result of the accident; test disclosed them to be in proper working order.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by Train No. 109 striking an automobile which had been shoved upon the track by a following automobile striking it in the rear while it was standing at a highway grade crossing waiting for the train to pass.

The driver of the following automobile, G.H. Swift, claimed that he was driving at a speed of about 10 miles per hour approaching the crossing, with his headlights burning dimly, and that on seeing the flashing lights of the crossing signal he reduced speed to about 4 or 5 miles per hour but did not see the automobile standing at the crossing ahead of him until it was only about 3 feet distant, saying that there was no tail light burning on the rear of that car; his car then struck the standing car and knocked it upon the track immediately in front of the approaching train. It also appeared from this driver's statements that he was familiar with the crossing and that the brakes on his car were in good condition. Not only does Swift's statement that he did not see the car ahead of him until it was only 3 feet distant indicate that he was not paying any attention to where he was going, but the fact that his car struck the standing car with sufficient force to knock it ahead a distance of at least 17 feet indicates that his speed was considerably higher than stated by him and that had he not struck the standing car his own car would have run upon the crossing, directly in front of the approaching train.

There is no excuse for the occurrence of an accident of this character. The evidence indicated that the flashing lights were working properly as the train approached, that the crossing bell was ringing, the engine whistle and bell sounded, and the headlight burning brightly, while there was an electric street light only 40 feet south of the crossing. Under such circumstances it was nothing but gross carelessness for Swift to be paying so little attention to where he was going as to fail to see the automobile standing at the crossing in time to avoid striking it, particularly as it had passed his own car only a short distance south of the crossing.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON

Director.