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Inv-2151

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION.

WASHINGTON

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REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

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ACCIDENT ON THE

NORTHERN PACIFIC RAILWAY

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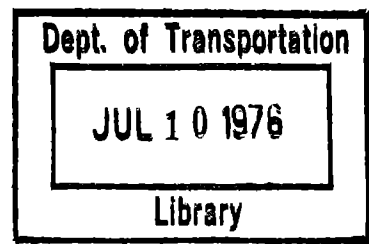
PINGREE, N. D.

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FEBRUARY 22, 1937

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INVESTIGATION NO. 2151



SUMMARY

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Inv-2151

Railroad: Northern Pacific  
Date: February 22, 1937  
Location: Pingree, N. D.  
Kind of accident: Rear-end collision  
Trains involved: Snow plow train : Mixed train  
Train numbers: Extra 1561 : Train No. 165  
Engine numbers: 1561 : 1813  
Consist: Snow plow and : 10 cars  
caboose  
Speed: Standing : 10-20 m. p. h.  
Track: Tangent; 0.322 percent descending grade  
Weather: Snow storm  
Time: 2:53 p. m.  
Casualties: 1 killed and 2 injured  
Cause: Failure of Extra 1561 to provide  
flag protection

Inv-2151

April 26, 1937

To the Commission:

On February 22, 1937, there was a rear-end collision between a snow plow train and a mixed train on the Northern Pacific Railway near Pingree, N. D., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of one passenger and one employee.

#### Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Eighth Sub-division of the Faigo Division, which extends between Pingree and Wilton, N. D., a distance of 92.8 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, no block-signal system being in use except in times of stormy weather. This accident occurred at the Vashti water tank, located 3 miles west of Pingree; approaching this point from the east the track is tangent for more than 2 miles, this tangent extending for some distance beyond. The grade for west-bound trains is 0.322 percent descending at the point of accident.

The speed for freight trains hauled by the type of engine used on the mixed train is limited by timetable instructions to 30 miles per hour and for the type of engine used on the snow plow train the speed is restricted to 35 miles per hour.

A heavy snowstorm accompanied by a high northwest wind prevailed and visibility was very poor at the time of the accident, which occurred about 2:53 p. m.

#### Description

Extra 1561, a west-bound snow plow train, consisted of snow plow No. 27, engine 1561 and a caboose, in the order named, and was in charge of Conductor Keohen and Engineman Clough. This train departed from Jamestown, N. D., its initial terminal and 21.3 miles from Pingree, at 1:45 p. m., according to the train sheet, left Pingree at 2:37 p. m., stopped at the Vashti water tank and while standing at that point its rear end was struck by Train No. 165.

Train No. 165, a west-bound second-class mixed train, consisted of 8 freight cars, 1 combination baggage and mail car and 1 coach, in the order named, hauled by engine 1813, and was in charge of Conductor Riggs and Engineman Knudson. This train departed from Jamestown at 8:40 a. m., according to the train

sheet, and arrived at Pingree at 10:10 a. m., where it was held until after the arrival of the snow plow; it then departed from Pingree at 2:47 p. m., according to the train sheet, and collided with Extra 1561 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 10 and 20 miles per hour.

The caboose of Extra 1561 was completely demolished and the balance of the train was driven forward about 112 feet; the tender of engine 1561 was derailed. The engine, tender and front truck of the first car of Train No. 165 were derailed, the front end of the engine being considerably damaged. The employee killed was the head brakeman of Extra 1561 and the employee injured was the flagman of Extra 1561.

#### Summary of evidence

Engineman Clough, of Extra 1561, stated that on stopping at Vashti water tank he did not whistle out a flag as he figured that the delay would be short, and he does not whistle out a flag at water tanks unless there is an unusual delay. The visibility was very poor, but from past experience under similar weather conditions, he assumed that a following train would be blocked one station in the rear. He did not have any definite information relative to Train No. 165; he had talked with Brakeman Flannigan of that train but he did not tell the Brakeman that he was going to stop at the water tank.

Conductor Keohen, of Extra 1561, stated that when he received his orders at Jamestown, the operator informed him that on account of the severe storm, Train No. 165 was being held at Pingree. On arrival at Pingree, Conductor Keohen talked with the conductor of Train No. 165, but nothing was said as to how soon that train was to leave there. He had an understanding with his engineman that they would stop at Vashti water tank; he looked at his watch on pulling out of the junction switch at Pingree and it was then 2:40 p. m. His train proceeded at a speed of about 30 miles per hour and stopped at the water tank at 2:50 p. m. The range of vision was limited to about 30 feet, but no fuses were thrown off and when Flagman Delmore asked him if he should go back to flag, he told the flagman that he need not go out in the storm, that it would be useless for him to go out, and that Train No. 165 surely would not be following them closely out of Pingree. He thought that Train No. 165 would be held at Pingree until his own train had passed Woodworth, 20.4 miles from Pingree. As the valve of the tank was frozen some trouble was experienced in taking water and Flagman Delmore assisted Head Brakeman Murray in loosening the valve; after taking water, difficulty was again experienced in seating the valve, and Conductor Keohen had just started up the ladder of the water tank to help the brakeman when he saw Train

No. 165 behind his own train. He stated that his train had been standing at the water tank about 3 minutes at the time of the accident. The statements of Flagman Delmore corroborated those of Conductor Keohen.

Engineman Knudson, of Train No. 165, stated that he knew that his train was closely following the snow plow out of Pingree but he thought the crew of that train was aware of the fact. After proceeding about 1 mile from Pingree the visibility became so bad that he was unable to see any land marks. He was operating the train at a speed of about 25 miles per hour when he saw the outline of the water tank about 8 car lengths ahead. He applied the air brakes and closed the throttle as he intended to stop for water; he saw the caboose ahead when about 5 car lengths from it and immediately placed the brake valve in emergency position but due to the previous application, a full emergency effect of the brakes was not obtained. He estimated the speed to have been reduced to about 15 miles per hour at the time of the accident. Engineman Knudson stated that as a rule, during stormy weather, trains are blocked a station apart and he expected that if the preceding train was delayed for any cause it would be protected by flag.

Fireman Barton, of Train No. 165, estimated the speed of his train to have been about 10 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Conductor Riggs, of Train No. 165, stated that instructions were received at Pingree to remain there and let the snow plow train precede them on the Wilton Branch. Station work was then performed and an air brake test was made. The snow plow train arrived and as it was leaving the station he instructed his head brakeman to ride down to the junction switch on that train and relieve the crew of the duty of closing the switch, as their own train would use it in a few minutes. Brakeman Flannigan carried out these instructions and then lined the other switches for the departure of his own train. Conductor Riggs stated that he then delivered a train order and a clearance card to his engine-man, and his train started to pull out of the passing track about 3 or 4 minutes later, and as they departed from Pingree, after closing all of the switches, he looked at his watch and it was 2:44 p.m. He estimated the speed of his train to have been 15 or 18 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Head Brakeman Flannigan, of Train No. 165, stated that he informed the crew of the snow plow train that he would take care of the junction switch after their departure, but he did not have any conversation with any member of that crew pertaining to the movement of either train.

Agent-Operator Tangney, at Pingree, stated that a snow-storm prevailed when he went on duty on the morning of the accident, restricting the vision to about 10 or 15 car lengths, and he reported the weather conditions to the dispatcher about 9 a. m. He talked with the dispatcher about weather conditions at intervals, and he was listening in on the wire when Trainmaster Mulroy gave instructions to hold Train No. 165 at Pingree for the purpose of running the snow plow train ahead. Operator Tangney reported the arrival of Train No. 165 and Trainmaster Furst, who was on that train, remained at the station until the arrival of the snow plow train and gave the dispatcher considerable information regarding conditions. Trainmaster Furst departed on the snow plow train. When reporting the departure of that train to the dispatcher, Operator Tangney inquired as to whether he should let Train No. 165 go, and the dispatcher replied in the affirmative; he therefore immediately cleared Train No. 165. A question arose in his own mind as to the advisability of allowing the train to follow so closely under the existing weather conditions, but inasmuch as the dispatcher had authorized the movement, he said nothing further about it. He stated that it is the practice to block trains during stormy weather, and it was his impression that this had been done with the trains involved, at Buchanan, located 7.8 miles east of Pingree.

Dispatcher Guinn, at Jamestown, stated that he received a report from Pingree about 9 a. m. to the effect that it was blustery and blowing, and stations on the Wilton Line west of Pingree reported that it was quite blustery and the snow was drifting. While weather reports from various stations along the line indicated the weather to be bad, he obeyed Trainmaster Mulroy's instructions to let Train No. 165 follow the snow plow train out of Pingree. Dispatcher Guinn stated that Trainmaster Mulroy was fully aware of the weather conditions, having heard the reports from the operators along the line, but nothing was said about blocking Train No. 165 behind the snow plow train. He had always blocked the snow plows against other trains, but he did not consider it a hazard to let Train No. 165 follow the snow plow. In another statement, however, he said that had he been alone in the office and made the decision himself, he would have blocked the trains, but Trainmaster Mulroy gave him the instructions to let Train No. 165 follow the snow plow, about 5 minutes prior to the time he released the trains.

Trainmaster Mulroy, located at Jamestown, stated that he had heard nothing from Pingree or any other point to indicate that the weather conditions were such as to restrict visibility to so limited an extent, stating that there had been a thaw during the past few days and he considered that there was sufficient crust on the snow to prevent it from moving. He stated that he may have told the dispatcher to let No. 165 follow the snow plow out

of Pingree, but blocking trains has been the practice for 35 years and written instructions to that effect have been issued by the superintendent from time to time. He had no idea that the storm was of such severity as to prevent trains from closely following each other with safety and stated that he did not have any conversation with Dispatcher Guinn five minutes before Train No. 165 was cleared, as he was not in such close touch with the situation.

#### Discussion

The evidence indicates that it has been the practice for many years to block trains during stormy weather, written instructions to that effect having been issued from time to time and the weather conditions on the day of the accident warranted such action. The crew of the snow plow train stated that they expected this custom to be followed and did not provide any flag protection when the stop was made at the water tank, the engineman stating that he does not whistle out a flag unless an unusual delay is expected, and the conductor told the flagman that it was not necessary to provide rear-end protection. The crew may have been justified in assuming that the customary practice of blocking trains would be followed, nevertheless this did not relieve them from providing flag protection in accordance with rule 99. In view of the restricted visibility, a fusee should have been thrown off as the train reduced speed approaching the water tank. If this had been done the fusee no doubt would have been seen in time to <sup>have</sup> prevented the accident, inasmuch as the engineman of Train No. 165 also expected to stop at the tank. Failing to leave a fusee, the flagman should have gone back and afforded proper protection.

In view of past practice in connection with blocking trains during bad weather, it is believed that the failure to follow this procedure was an important contributing factor in the cause of this accident. The evidence indicates that the dispatcher was fully aware of the weather conditions along the line, but he instructed the operator to let Train No. 165 follow the snow plow train in accordance with the instructions of Trainmaster Mulroy, whom he also stated was aware of the weather conditions. Trainmaster Mulroy, however, stated that he did not know that the storm was of such proportions as to prevent trains from closely following each other with safety.

#### Conclusion

This accident was caused by failure to protect Extra 1561 by flag.

Respectfully submitted,  
W. J. PATTERSON,  
Director.