

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING AN  
ACCIDENT ON THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD AT ST. ELMO, ILL.,  
ON MAY 28, 1933.

July 28, 1933.

To the Commission:

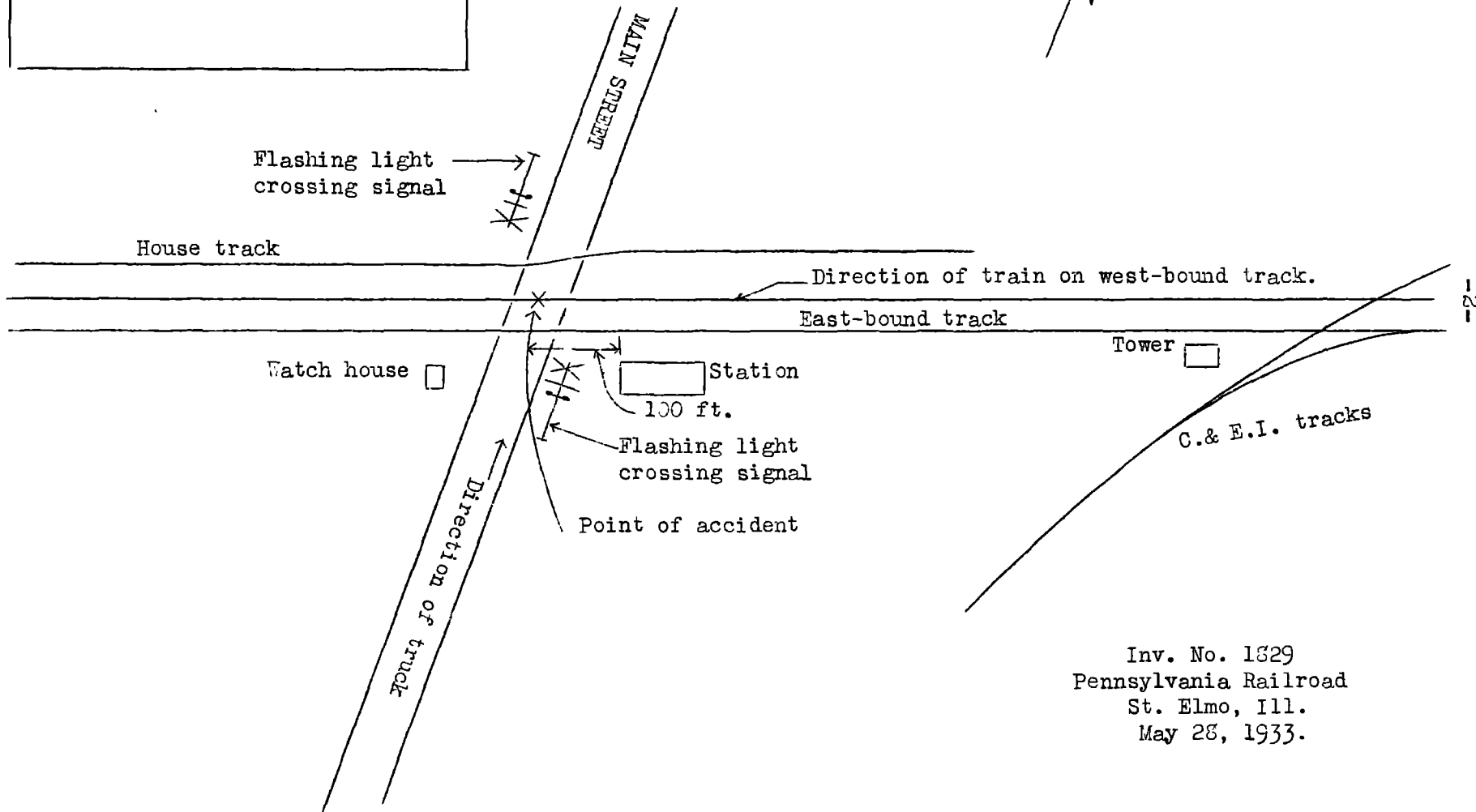
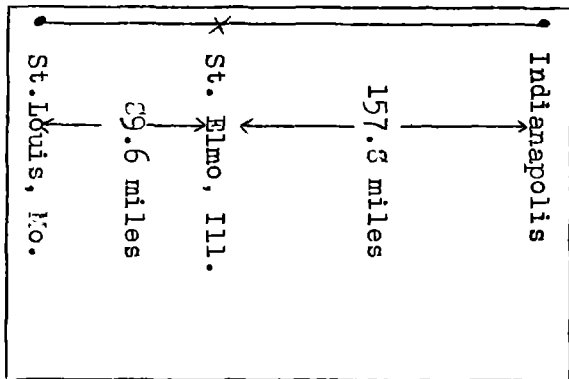
On May 28, 1933, a passenger train struck an automobile tank truck at a grade crossing on the Pennsylvania Railroad at St. Elmo, Ill., which resulted in the death of 2 occupants of the truck, and the injury of 2 employees, 1 of whom subsequently died, and 2 trespassers.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the St. Louis Division which extends between Indianapolis, Ind., and St. Louis, Mo., a distance of 247.4 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a double-track line over which trains are operated by time table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The accident occurred on the west-bound track approximately 100 feet west of the station, where Main Street crosses the tracks at an angle of 68°. Approaching the crossing from either direction, the track is tangent for several miles, while the grade is practically level at the point of accident. The authorized speed for passenger trains in this territory is 70 miles per hour.

Main Street extends north and south and consists of a concrete pavement 20 feet in width, with the crossing of bituminous construction. The street passes over three tracks at this crossing, from south to north as follows; east-bound, west-bound and house tracks; approaching the tracks from the south there is a slight ascending grade.

A warning sign of the cross-bar type, with two red flashing lights, is located about 12 feet south of the east-bound track and 6 feet east of the side of the street. The concrete post on which the signs are mounted is 12 feet in height; the cross-bars are white with black letters reading "RAILROAD CROSSING", and below these is a horizontal board bearing the word "DANGER". The two flashing lights are mounted on a yoke fastened to the post below the above-mentioned signs; the lights are 30 inches apart and 7½ feet above the ground. These lights are operated automatically when a west-bound train enters on a circuit at a point 2,700 feet east of the crossing, and flash continuously until the train clears the crossing. A crossing watchman is on duty at this crossing between the hours of 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., and during that time the circuit is cut off; a locked control box on a relay pole at the crossing contains a knife switch which when opened shuts off the current and when closed allows the lights to operate. A similar warning sign is located on the north side of the crossing. The watchman was not on duty at the time of the accident.



Inv. No. 1329  
 Pennsylvania Railroad  
 St. Elmo, Ill.  
 May 28, 1933.

An approaching west-bound train can be seen for a distance of 2 miles by the driver of a north-bound vehicle when he is at a point 145 feet south of the center of the west-bound track; when 75 feet from the track he can see a train 1 mile, and the view is then restricted on passing the station located east of the street and south of the tracks, until a point 45 feet from the west-bound track is reached, when the view is unobstructed for a distance of 500 feet, and when 25 feet from the track in question the view is extended to 2 miles.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 5:45 p.m.

#### Description

West-bound passenger train No. 19 consisted of 1 express car, 1 mail storage car, 1 mail car, 1 combination baggage and parlor car, 1 parlor car, 1 dining car, 1 parlor lounge, and 3 Pullman sleeping cars, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 1433, and was in charge of Conductor Shorb and Engineman Ahlers. This train departed from Terre Haute, Ind., 85.1 miles east of St. Elmo, at 4:13 p.m., according to the train sheet, 7 minutes late, passed Altamont, 5.5 miles from St. Elmo, at 5:40 p.m., 2 minutes late, and struck an automobile tank truck at the Main Street crossing at St. Elmo while traveling at an estimated speed of 65 or 70 miles per hour.

The automobile tank truck involved was a Chevrolet, four-wheel, 1931, six-cylinder model, operated by D. W. Gibbons, owner of the Cumberland Garage and agent for the Mobilegas and Dietrich Oil Company of St. Elmo. The truck had a capacity of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  tons and was loaded with 160 gallons of gasoline and 98 gallons of kerosene. The truck, driven by Van Lee Smith, the filling-station attendant, left the garage, located five blocks south of the Pennsylvania tracks, and traveled northward on Main Street, stopping about 36 feet south of the crossing, where the young brother of the driver, about 9 years of age, got in on the seat beside him. The truck then proceeded toward the crossing at a low rate of speed and when about 10 feet from the crossing a man by the name of Oscar Goodwin jumped on the running board on the right side of the truck, placed his head and shoulders inside of the cab and told Driver Smith that he would jump off at the corner two blocks north of the crossing. The truck continued upon the crossing at a speed estimated to have been from 1 to 5 miles per hour and was struck at about the center of the body by train No. 19, Oscar Goodwin having jumped off the running board just before the collision.

The truck was demolished and the contents of the tanks were sprayed over the engine, tender, and lead cars of the train, and immediately caught fire. The chassis of the truck was thrown about 25 feet north of the track, while the tank was carried on the front end of the engine for a distance of about 400 feet, when it fell off to the right. The train traveled a distance of 4,400 feet west of the crossing before it was stopped. No

part of the train was derailed but the engine, tender and several of the cars were damaged, the engine being badly scorched. The employees injured were the engineman and fireman, who were so badly burned that no statements could be made by them; the fireman subsequently died.

#### Summary of evidence

Conductor Shorb stated that the train was traveling at a speed of 65 or 70 miles per hour approaching St. Elmo, and that he was standing in the mail car when he saw flames outside of the train; he ran to the door, looked both ways, went to the baggage car and pulled the whistle signal, and then reached for the emergency brake valve, but just at that time a service application of the air brakes was made. Conductor Shorb stated that he did not remember hearing the crossing whistle signal sounded; Flagman Christian, however, was out on the rear platform of the rear car, and he stated that he heard the engineman sound this signal.

Operator-Towerman Regenold, of the C. & E. I. and the Pennsylvania Railroads, on duty at the tower located about 800 feet east of the crossing and south of the main tracks, stated that when the operator at Altamont reported that train No. 19 had passed that point and was descending the hill about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles east, he noticed the tank truck approach the crossing. The truck stopped about 50 feet south of the crossing, at which time he was able to see only the rear end of the truck, as the station obscured his view, and after standing there a minute or two it continued slowly to the crossing, probably at a speed of 1 mile per hour, and as it neared the crossing he saw a man run from the sidewalk on the east or right side of the street, jump on to the running board, and lean over inside of the cab. Train No. 19 was approaching at a speed of 65 or 70 miles per hour; the standard crossing whistle signal was sounded and as the engine passed the tower he gave a "washout" signal, but he did not know whether or not the fireman saw it, although as the train passed he heard danger whistle signals being sounded. When the front wheels of the truck had passed over the south rail of the west-bound track the man on the running board jumped off and ran southward; the train was then not more than 40 feet from the truck. Operator Regenold stated that he was unable to see the flashing lights at the crossing, due to it being daylight with the sun shining, but he observed that they functioned properly when the relief engine arrived and also that evening when an eastbound train passed.

Crossing Watchman Seales stated that before leaving the crossing at 4:30 p.m. on the day of the accident, he turned the switch so as to complete the flashing-light circuit. His home is located about 500 feet southwest of the crossing and as he was walking from his coal shed to his house he saw train No. 19 approaching and noticed that the flashing lights were working; he heard the crossing whistle and danger signals sounded, but due to the location of the watch box near the crossing he was unable to

see the truck, but he heard the explosion and saw the flames shooting into the air. After reaching the crossing his son told him that some of the people standing around there were saying that the lights were not flashing, so with four witnesses he opened the control box to look at the switch, which was found to be in the closed position, the proper position to operate the lights.

Telegraph and Signal Foreman Ellicott, who arrived at the scene of the accident about 7 p.m., said that Maintainer Cleeton shunted the circuit and found that the lights functioned properly. Later when a light engine arrived to pull back train No. 19, and also when an east-bound train passed over the crossing, the lights were observed to be working properly. Sometime later when he examined the knife switch which controls the lights he found it in the proper position.

Statements were obtained from three persons who lived in the vicinity of the crossing and were at their respective homes at the time of the accident, and each of them heard many short blasts or danger signals sounded by train No. 19, although none of them witnessed the occurrence of the accident.

Captain of Police Brown and Road Patrolman Weddle stated that in connection with their investigation they found that Van Lee Smith had been employed as a filling-station attendant at the Cumberland garage for the past 10 months, and had been given permission by Mr. Gibbons to drive the truck to his home for dinner; on previous occasions he had driven Mr. Gibbons' private automobile to his home for meals. Van Lee Smith was 19 years of age and it appeared that he did not have a driver's license; he was on his way to his home at the time of the accident. When Oscar Goodwin jumped on the running board of the truck just before reaching the crossing he told Driver Smith that he would get off about two blocks north of the crossing and they conversed about having Goodwin get in on the seat in the cab. The investigation made by the police officers also indicated that Driver Smith was the first to notice the approaching train as from the way he spoke, Goodwin knew that something was wrong and jumped off and ran southward, the truck continuing northward over the crossing at about the same rate of speed. Subsequently Goodwin refused to make any statement.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by an automobile tank truck being driven upon a railroad crossing at grade directly in front of an approaching train.

The crossing involved was protected by a flashing-light crossing signal and the evidence indicates that the lights were

working properly at the time of the accident, and that the regular crossing whistle signal as well as danger signals were sounded by the engineman of the rapidly approaching train. While the truck was brought to a stop about 36 feet or more from the crossing, this stop apparently was for the purpose of allowing the driver's young brother to get in the cab with him, and was made at a point where the driver's view of the train was obscured by the station building. The truck then proceeded at a very low rate of speed, estimated by one witness to have been 1 mile per hour, and when about 10 feet from the crossing a passerby jumped upon the running board on the right side and leaned over into the cab; undoubtedly this further distracted Driver Smith's attention from the crossing and interfered with his view of the approaching train, and when he did see the train it was too late to do anything, although the passerby was able to jump off the running board before the train struck the truck.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.