

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON

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REPORT NO. 3281  
READING COMPANY  
IN RE ACCIDENT  
AT PORT CARBON, PA., CT  
SEPTEMBER 20, 1949

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SUMMARY

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Date: September 20, 1949

Railroad: Reading

Location: Port Carbon, Pa.

Kind of accident: Collision

Equipment involved: Passenger train : Motor-truck

Train number: 91 :

Engine number: 216 :

Consist: 6 cars :

Estimated speeds: 29 m. p. h. : 4 m. p. h.

Operation: Timetable, train orders and  
manual-block system

Track: Single; tangent; 0.3 percent  
ascending grade westward

Highway: Tangent; crosses track at right  
angles; level over crossing

Weather: Clear

Time: 9:18 a. m.

Casualties: 2 killed; 3 injured

Cause: Motor-truck occupying rail-highway  
grade-crossing immediately in front  
of approaching train

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

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REPORT NO. 3281

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

READING COMPANY

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November 28, 1949

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Accident at Port Carbon, Pa., on September 20, 1949, caused  
by a motor-truck occupying a rail-highway grade-crossing  
immediately in front of an approaching train.

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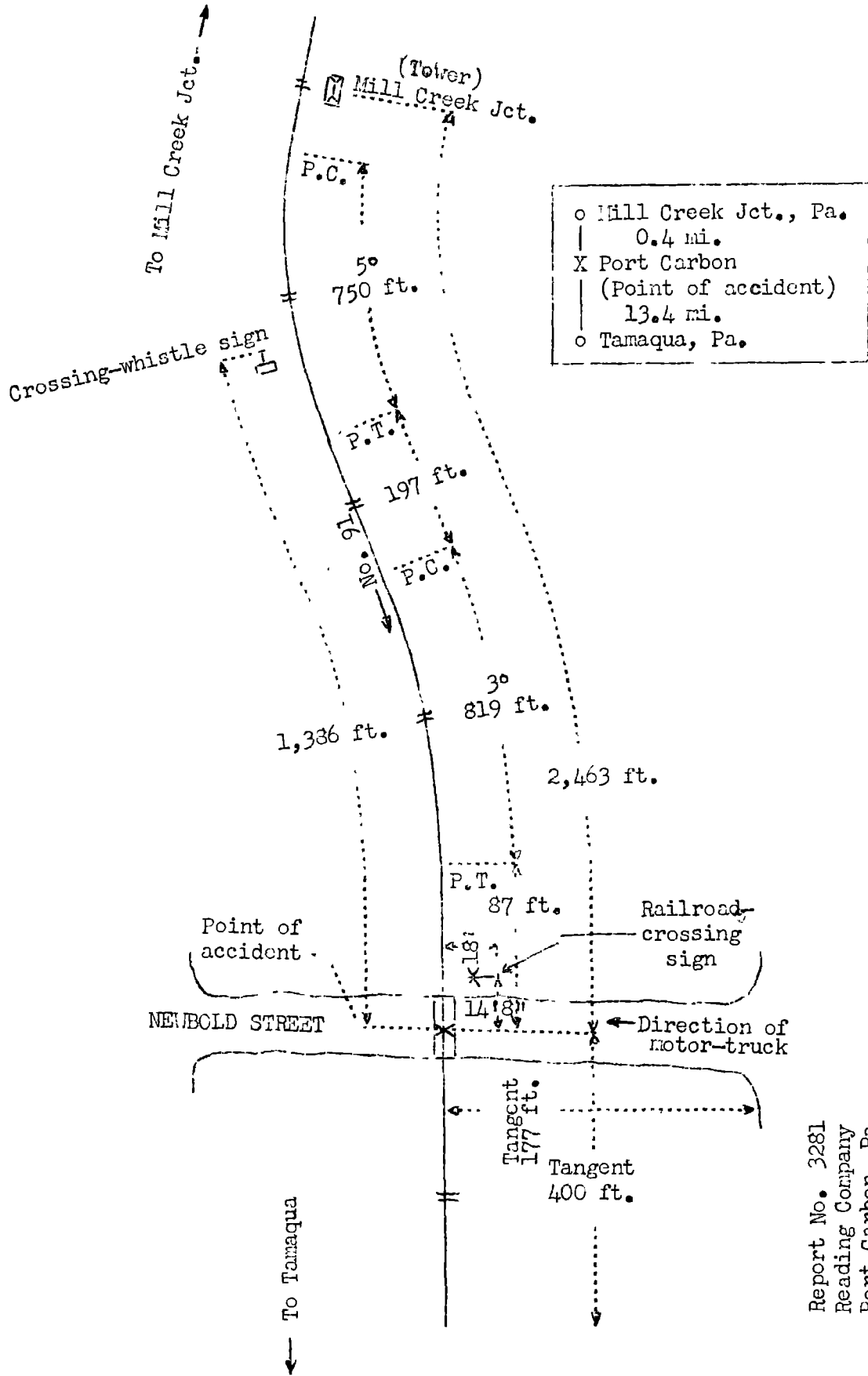
REPORT OF THE COMMISSION<sup>1</sup>

PATTERSON, Commissioner:

On September 20, 1949, there was a collision between a  
passenger train on the line of the Reading Company and a  
motor-truck at a rail-highway grade-crossing at Port Carbon,  
Pa., which resulted in the death of the driver of the motor-  
truck and one train-service employee, and the injury of three  
train-service employees.

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<sup>1</sup>  
Under authority of section 17 (2) of the Interstate Com-  
merce Act the above-entitled proceeding was referred by the  
Commission to Commissioner Patterson for consideration and  
disposition.



Report No. 3281  
 Reading Company  
 Port Carbon, Pa.  
 September 20, 1949

Location of Accident and Method of Operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Shamokin Division extending between Mill Creek Jct. and Tamaqua, Pa., 13.8 miles, a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable, train orders and a manual-block system. The accident occurred on the main track 2,463 feet west of Mill Creek Jct., where the main track is crossed at grade by Newbold Street, Port Carbon. From the east, on the railroad, there are, in succession, a 5° curve to the left 750 feet in length, a tangent 197 feet, a 3° curve to the right 819 feet and a tangent 87 feet to the point of accident and 400 feet westward. The grade is 0.3 percent ascending westward. Newbold Street intersects the railroad at right angles, is an unimproved street, and is tangent 177 feet immediately south of the crossing. The crossing is 20 feet wide and is surfaced with a bituminous material to approximately the level of the tops of the rails. Planking is installed on each side of each rail. Flangeways 3 inches in width are provided. The grade for north-bound vehicles is 16 percent ascending 25 feet immediately south of the crossing, and is level over the crossing.

A standard cross-buck railroad-crossing sign is located in the southeast angle of the intersection, 18 feet south of the center-line of the railroad and 14 feet 8 inches east of the center-line of Newbold Street. This sign is mounted on a mast 9 feet 8 inches above the level of the street, and bears the words "RAILROAD CROSSING" in black letters on a white background. There is no advance warning railroad-crossing sign. A crossing-whistle sign for west-bound trains is located 1,386 feet east of the crossing.

This carrier's 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 crossing is reached. \* \* \*

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Section 1027 of The Vehicle Code, The Tractor Code and Other Laws \* \* \* of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, relating to Motor Vehicles and Tractors, reads in part as follows:

Section 1027. Certain Vehicles to Stop at Railway Grade Crossings.--

All \* \* \* vehicles transporting explosives, or flammable liquids as a cargo or part of a cargo, shall come to a complete stop immediately before crossing a railway grade crossing.

The maximum authorized speed for the train involved was 45 miles per hour.

Description of Accident

No. 91, a west-bound first-class passenger train, consisted of engine 216, two express cars, one mail car, one mail-storage car, one coach and one chair car, in the order named. All cars were of steel construction. This train passed Mill Creek Jct., the last open office, at 9:16 a. m., on time, and while moving at a speed of 29 miles per hour, as indicated by the tape of the speed recording device, it struck a motor-truck on a rail-highway grade-crossing 2,463 feet west of Mill Creek Jct.

The motor-truck involved was a tractor and semi-trailer operated by E. Brook Matlack, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa. The driver, who was the sole occupant, held Pennsylvania driver's license No. 226499. The tractor was a 1945 EHT Mack and bore Pennsylvania license No. W-914-N. It was equipped with single tires on the front wheels, dual tires on the rear wheels and air brakes on all wheels. It was provided with an enclosed steel cab. The semi-trailer was a Butler type, and was equipped with dual wheels and air brakes. It bore Pennsylvania license No. 59-H-8. It was equipped with a cylindrical steel tank divided into three compartments, and at the time of the accident the cargo consisted of 4,500 gallons of gasoline. The total length of the tractor and semi-trailer was 43 feet 10 inches. The total weight of the tractor, semi-trailer and cargo was 41,000 pounds. The cargo was loaded at Claymont, Del., and was en route to Port Carbon, Pa. This motor-truck was moving northward on Newbold Street at a speed of about 4 miles per hour when it entered the crossing and was struck by No. 91.

The tractor was separated from the semi-trailer and stopped adjacent to the north side of the track, at a point 61 feet west of the center-line of the crossing. It was demolished. The semi-trailer stopped on the south side of the crossing and at an angle of 45° to the track, with its rear end adjacent to the track and near the center-line of the street. The tank was punctured, escaping gasoline became ignited, and the semi-trailer was practically destroyed by fire.

No. 91 stopped with the front end of the engine 275 feet west of the center-line of Newbold Street and with the third car over the crossing. The engine and the first and second cars were slightly damaged by the collision and the resulting fire, and the third and fourth cars were badly damaged by fire.

The fireman was killed. The engineer, the baggageman and the assistant baggageman were injured.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 9:18 a. m.

During the 30-day period preceding the day of the accident, the average daily movement over the crossing was 8 trains. During the 24-hour period beginning at 12:01 a. m., September 29, 1949, 72 automobiles and 44 trucks passed over the crossing.

#### Discussion

As No. 91 approached Newbold Street the speed was 29 miles per hour. The enginemen were in the cab of the engine. The fireman was killed and the engineer was so seriously injured that he could not be questioned during the investigation. Members of the train crew, who were located in various positions throughout the train, said that the engine-whistle signal was being sounded for the crossing when the brakes were applied in emergency immediately before the collision occurred. The brakes of this train had been tested and had functioned properly when used en route.

The crossing was protected by a standard cross-buck rail-road-crossing sign. The driver of the motor-truck had held a driver's license for 14 years and had been employed during

a period of about 4 years as a commercial driver by the company that owned the truck. He had traversed this route on numerous occasions and was familiar with the crossing involved. He had been off duty a period of 11 hours 30 minutes prior to reporting for duty on the day of the accident, and had been on duty 2 hours 48 minutes when the accident occurred.

The view of an approaching west-bound train had by the driver of a vehicle moving north on Newbold Street is materially restricted to a point about 25 feet south of the center-line of the main track, because of buildings on the east side of the street. Between that point and the main track there is an unobstructed view throughout a distance of approximately 1,800 feet. Immediately south of the crossing on the highway the grade is 16 percent ascending to the level of the crossing, and on loaded trucks it is necessary to shift into low gear at that point in order to negotiate the crossing. Witnesses to the accident said that they first saw the truck when it was a few feet south of the track, and that it was moving on the ascending grade at a speed of about 4 miles per hour. They heard the whistle of the approaching train and said that the motor-truck entered the crossing without stopping. The tractor had cleared the track, but the semi-trailer was struck by the engine.

Under the laws of the State of Pennsylvania governing the operation of motor vehicles, the driver of the motor-truck involved was required to stop the vehicle immediately before it entered the rail-highway grade-crossing.

Cause

It is found that this accident was caused by a motor-truck occupying a rail-highway grade-crossing immediately in front of an approaching train.

Dated at Washington, D. C., this twenty-eighth day of November, 1949.

By the Commission, Commissioner Patterson.

(SEAL)

W. P. BARTEL,  
Secretary.