

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE SEABOARD AIR LINE RAILWAY AT SCOTT, FLA.,
ON DECEMBER 11, 1931.

February 3, 1932.

To the Commission:

On December 11, 1931, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Seaboard Air Line Railway at Scott, Fla., which resulted in the death of 2 employees, and the injury of 5 passengers, 1 mail clerk, and 1 railroad official.

Location and method of operation

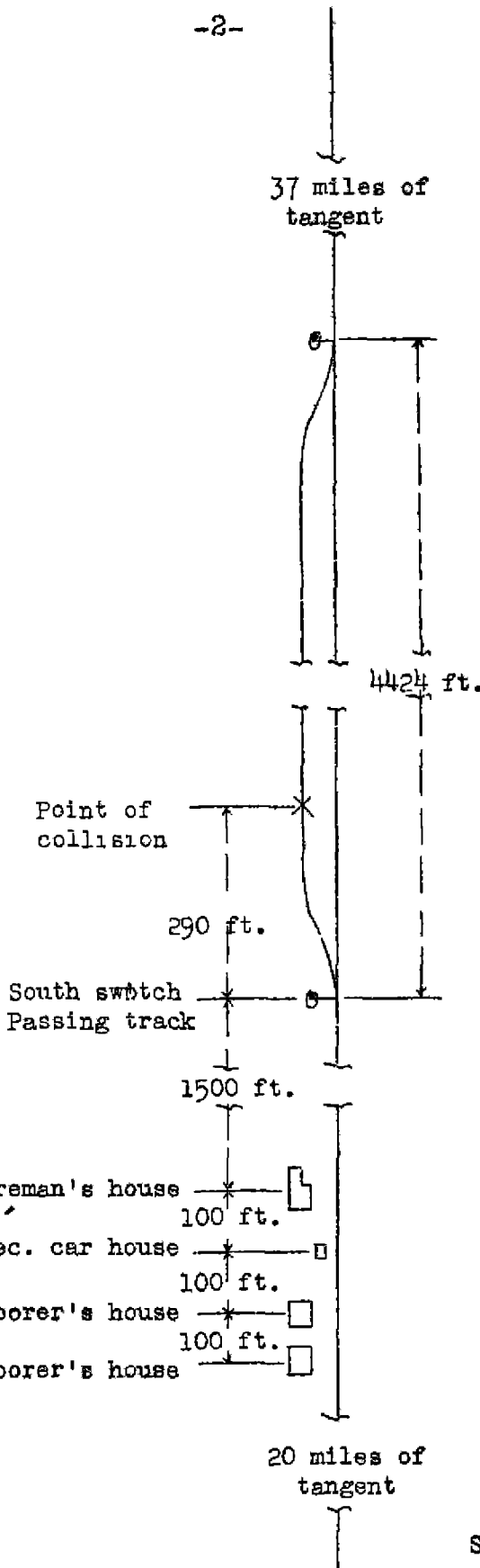
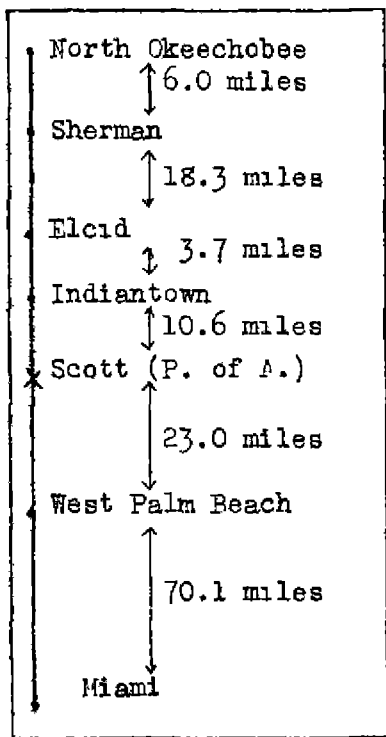
This accident occurred on the West Palm Beach Subdivision of the North Florida Division, extending between Miami and North Okeechobee, Fla., a distance of 131.7 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred on the passing track at Scott, at a point about 290 feet north of the south switch, this is a facing-point switch for north-bound trains and leads off the main track through a No. 10 turnout to the west, the passing track being 4,424 feet in length. Approaching from either direction the track is tangent for 20 miles or more, while the grade for several miles in each direction is practically level. The view is unobstructed.

The switch stand is of the Weir intermediate type, located on the west side of the track, equipped with switch lamp and banners; normal night indications are green, with the white, diagonal, pointed-end banner displayed, when the switch is closed, while the switch lamp shows red, with the red, horizontal, double-disk banner displayed, when the switch is open. At the time of the accident, however, the switch lamp was not burning.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 10.45 p. m.

Description

Southbound freight train extra 220 consisted of 43 loaded and 12 empty cars, and a caboose, hauled by engine 220, and was in charge of Conductor Daugherty and Engineman Webber. This train left North Okeechobee, the last open office, 38.6 miles



Inv. No. 1743
 Seaboard Air Line Ry.,
 Scott, Fla.,
 Dec. 11, 1931.

north of Scott, at 8.30 p. m., according to the train sheet, following which an overheated journal developed on the thirteenth car in the train, necessitating that the journal be rebrassed. On arrival at Scott the train backed in the siding at the south switch, in order to rebrass the journal, being brought to a stop with the front end of the engine about 290 feet north of the switch, and then the headlight was extinguished; after standing at this point about 22 minutes, with the switch open, the engine was struck by train No. 192.

Northbound passenger train No. 192, the New York-Florida Limited, consisted of 2 express cars, 1 mail and baggage car, 1 passenger and baggage car, 1 coach, 3 Pullman sleeping cars, and 1 business car, in the order named, hauled by engine 832, and was in charge of Conductor Fry and Engineman Eubanks. The cars were of all-steel construction, with the exception of the business car, which was of steel-underframe construction. This train left West Palm Beach, the last open office, 22 miles south of Scott, at 10.15 p. m., according to the train sheet, on time, entered the south switch of the passing track at Scott and collided with extra 220 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 50 miles per hour.

The force of the impact drove extra 220 backwards a distance of about 40 feet, the boilers of both engines being torn from their frames and coming to rest on their sides west of the siding. The second, third and fourth cars in extra 220 were tank cars, the second car being loaded with oil and the other two with gasoline, these three cars were derailed to the west and caught fire, which spread to and consumed the first, fifth and sixth cars in the freight train, which were box cars. The rear portion of the freight train was pulled out of danger by the engine of another railroad that was sent to the scene. The first four cars and the forward truck of the fifth car in train No. 192 were derailed, stopping across the siding and main track in zig-zag fashion; the first car was on its left side and the second car leaned at an angle of about 45°, but the other three cars remained upright. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman of train No. 192.

Summary of evidence

Head Brakeman Wimberly, of extra 220, stated that Engineman Webber informed him that instructions had been received to arrange the work so as to reach West Palm Beach, 61.6 miles south of North Okeechobee, by 11 p. m., in order to make connections with a train of the Florida East Coast Railway at that point. Extra 220 departed from North Okeechobee at 8.20 p. m., and on reaching Sherman, 6 miles south thereof, cars were set off, after leaving Sherman an overheated journal developed on the thirteenth car, left side, and he notified

the engineman, who brought the train to a stop, about 1 mile north of Elcid, which station is located 18.3 miles south of Sherman. Head Brakeman Wimberly cooled off the hot box enough for the train to reach Indiantown water tank, 3.7 miles south of Elcid, where he packed the journal while the engine took on coal and water. On reaching a point about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles north of Scott, this station being located 10.6 miles south of Indiantown, the hot box blazed again, so the train was brought to a stop and the head brakeman cooled it off again, but he realized that it would be necessary to rebrass the journal and went back to the engine and informed the engineman accordingly. It was decided to rebrass the car at Scott and as the engine pulled by the south switch of the passing track at that point, Head Brakeman Wimberly dropped off just south of the switch, at which time he noticed that the switch lamp was not burning; he then boarded the caboose, where tools and necessary material for brassing the car were placed on the platform, got off and opened the switch, gave a back-up signal, boarded the caboose again, told Conductor Daugherty and Flagman Holder that he would return to the switch later and close it, as he would have plenty of time in which to do so, while the train was backing in on the siding he and the flagman dropped the tools off at the approximate location where the thirteenth car would stop, after which the conductor, flagman and head brakeman got off the caboose. When the train came to a stop, Head Brakeman Wimberly started toward the switch to close it, but after proceeding about one car-length he thought he saw Fireman May close it, saying that immediately afterwards the headlight was extinguished, which confirmed his belief that the fireman had closed the switch. Head Brakeman Wimberly then told Conductor Daugherty that Fireman May had closed the switch, whereupon the conductor told the head brakeman and the flagman to rebrass the journal and that he, the conductor, would attend to a brake beam that was dragging on about the twenty-third car in the train. Head Brakeman Wimberly was unaware of anything wrong until he saw train No. 192 enter the turnout, at which time he and the flagman were working with the jack between the passing track and main track, straightening a wedge. Head Brakeman Wimberly stated that he fully realized that he should not have left the switch unattended, and that he at no time forgot about it, but was certain in his own mind that the switch had been closed by the fireman.

Engineman Webber, of extra 220, stated that after pulling by the south switch of the passing track at Scott a back-up signal was received and he backed the train in on the siding. As the engine was backing by the south switch he observed that the switch lamp was not burning and he called this fact to the attention of the fireman. After getting the car with the overheated journal spotted for rebrassing, he looked ahead; the headlight was burning brightly and shone fully on the

switch target, which he was positive displayed a white indication, this being the indication when the switch is closed, and being thoroughly satisfied in his own mind that the switch was closed he then extinguished the headlight. Engineman Webber then got down on the left side of the engine and filled the lubricator, which is located under the running board, walked around the front end of the engine and back on the other side to the right rear driving box, which had been running hot, saw that it was all right, and returned to the left side of the engine and informed the fireman accordingly, following which the engineman took his torch and walked back to where the head brakeman and flagman were re-brassing the car with the overheated journal. While at this point the engineman heard train No. 192 sound the station whistle signal, so he went out in the middle of the main track and gave a proceed signal to that train with his torch, which was answered by the sounding of two short blasts on the whistle, the first intimation that Engineman Webber had of anything wrong was when Head Brakeman Wimberly shouted a warning of danger, the collision occurring immediately afterwards. Engineman Webber could not say whether the switch lamp was burning at the time his engine passed it prior to making the back-up movement. While he had not seen anybody at the switch, yet he was satisfied in his own mind that the switch was closed before he extinguished the headlight, otherwise he would have closed the switch himself. Engineman Webber did not say anything to his fireman about the position of the switch after backing in on the siding; the fireman remained on the engine continuously until the time the engineman started back to where the work of rebrassing was being performed. Engineman Webber made no examination of the switch lamp after the accident, saying that he was in no condition to do so at that time; his train had stood on the siding for at least 20 minutes prior to the occurrence of the accident and he realized that the accident probably would have been averted had he taken time to relight the switch lamp, but he said that he was working continuously after backing in on the siding and was anxious about getting the train to West Palm Beach by 11 p. m. for the Florida East Coast connection.

Fireman May, of extra 220, stated that the engineman called attention to the fact that the switch lamp was not burning as the engine passed the switch, while backing in on the siding. After the car with the overheated journal had been spotted for rebrassing, the fireman worked on the fire; he could see the reflection from the headlight of train No. 192 a considerable distance away and he looked out several times to observe how close that train was getting. Fireman May could not say how far train No. 192 was from the switch at the last time he looked, however, he observed by the reflection from the headlight of that train that the switch was open and jumped just before the collision occurred. Fireman May stated that he had not looked ahead while the

headlight of his own engine was burning, saying that immediately after the car had been spotted, the engineman extinguished the headlight; the fireman took it for granted, however, that the switch was closed and being quite tired from firing en route he stretched out to rest, occasionally looking out to observe the approach of train No. 192, and at no time did he get off the engine until he jumped just prior to the accident. He did not see anyone around the switch and nothing was said to him about closing it, otherwise he would willingly have done so.

Conductor Daugherty, of extra 220, stated that he was riding on the left side of a tank car, watching the car with the overheated journal, as his train passed the south switch of the passing track at Scott and when the train slowed down enough he dropped off and walked back to the caboose; the head brakeman and flagman were getting out tools and necessary material to rebrass the car. They rode the caboose when the train started to back in on the siding, dropped the tools off the caboose and got off themselves at the approximate location where the car to be rebrassed would stop, and after the entire train had backed in and stopped, the head brakeman started walking toward the switch to close it, and then turned back and told the conductor that he had seen the fireman close it. The conductor then told the head brakeman and flagman to rebrass the car with the overheated journal while he attended to the car farther back in the train with the dragging brake beam. Special Officer Hicks, who had been riding on the caboose, assisted the conductor and they had just about finished repairing the dragging brake beam when the collision occurred. Conductor Daugherty at no time noticed that the switch lamp was out prior to the accident, saying that had he known it he would have relighted it. When the conductor, flagman and head brakeman boarded the caboose at the time the back-up movement was started, the conductor got the impression that the head brakeman had an understanding with the engine crew about closing the switch, and after backing in on the siding the head brakeman was so positive about the switch being closed that it never occurred to the conductor that it might be open. In regard to the rules not being complied with, requiring that cars or tanks containing oil or other inflammable substances be placed in the train at least five cars from the engine, the conductor said that before setting off cars en route there had been 28 cars ahead of the three loaded tank cars which were close to the head end of the train at the time of the accident. While he had switched tank cars farther back in the train under similar conditions on previous occasions, yet in this instance he had received a message to try to reach West Palm Beach by 11 p. m., therefore, he did not take time to switch them back, although he did not consider that this message in any way relieved him of responsibility for the safe handling of the train. Statements of Flagman Holder and Special Officer

Hicks brought out nothing additional of importance; Flagman Holder said that he first noticed that the switch lamp was out after the train backed in on the siding and they were ready to start the work of rebrassing the car. Special Officer Hicks did not know that the switch lamp was out until after the accident.

Members of the train crew of train No. 192 were unaware of anything wrong until the accident occurred; after the accident it was observed that the switch lamp was out and the switch target displaying a red indication. Conductor Fry estimated the speed of his train to have been about 50 miles per hour and stated that the station signal was sounded on the engine whistle when approaching Scott. The air brakes had worked properly en route.

Section Foreman Hancock stated that this particular switch lamp was last cleaned and filled on December 5, at 4 p. m. On the night of the accident, around 9.30 p. m., he was out in front of his house, located about 1,500 feet south of the switch, and at that time he plainly saw the indication of the switch lamp. No trouble had been experienced with this lamp going out. He arrived at the scene of the accident about 15 minutes after its occurrence and observed that the switch lamp was then out, and about two hours later he inspected the lamp, found that one green lens was cracked, and that the wick was charred; later on the lamp was lighted several times, but it would not stay lighted. The fount was about two-thirds full of oil.

Section Laborer Jackson stated that he attends the switch lamps on his section every Saturday. On the night of the accident, after the freight train had stopped opposite his house preparatory to backing in on the siding, he noticed that the switch lamp was burning, plainly showing a red indication, saying that he saw the indication change from green to red at the time the switch was opened; he also said he saw the lamp showing red after the train had backed in on the siding.

Roadmaster Hutto stated that he arrived at the scene of the accident nearly three hours after its occurrence. Inspection of the switch lamp disclosed it to be in the condition described by Section Foreman Hancock; there was a crust on top of the wick, and the wick was turned low, but it was long enough to reach the bottom of the fount.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch, for which Head Brakeman Wimberly of extra 220 is primarily responsible.

Head Brakeman Wimberly dropped off the engine south of the switch, noticed that the switch lamp was not burning but did not relight it, boarded the caboose, and placed tools and material for rebrassing the thirteenth car on the rear platform; he then got off and opened the switch, gave a back-up signal, and again boarded the caboose as the train started to back in on the siding. The tools were dropped off at the approximate location where the thirteenth car would stop, and then the conductor, head brakeman and flagman got off. When the train had backed in, Head Brakeman Wimberly started to go ahead to close the switch but after starting ahead he thought he saw Fireman May close it, following which the headlight was extinguished, and this confirmed his belief that the switch was closed; about this time the conductor asked him who closed the switch and he told the conductor that the fireman had closed it. It was the duty of Head Brakeman Wimberly to close this switch, and he should not have allowed anything to interfere, particularly in view of the fact that he had not arranged with any one else to perform this duty for him.

Engineman Webber should not have extinguished the headlight after backing in on the siding until he knew beyond any question that the switch was properly closed, under the rules, he was required to see that the switch was properly closed after his train had backed in, but he failed to comply with the rules. Extra 220 stood on the passing track for more than 20 minutes prior to the accident and Engineman Webber, Fireman May, Head Brakeman Wimberly and Flagman Holder knew that the switch lamp was not burning, and there is no reason why Conductor Daugherty should not also have known it; not a single one of them, however, took upon himself the responsibility of relighting it, although all were promoted men. Such action on the part of any one of them probably would have averted the accident.

It also is to be noted that cars loaded with inflammables were being hauled with only one car between them and the engine, the only apparent reason for this violation of the rules being the statement by the conductor that he did not take the time to switch them farther back in the train as he wanted to reach West Palm Beach by 11 p. m. in order to make connections with a train of another railroad.

All of the employees involved were experienced men, and at the time of the accident none of them had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND

Director.