

1922

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING AN
ACCIDENT ON THE LINE OF THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC COMPANY
AT MANTECA, CALIF., ON AUGUST 3, 1934.

October 23, 1934.

To the Commission:

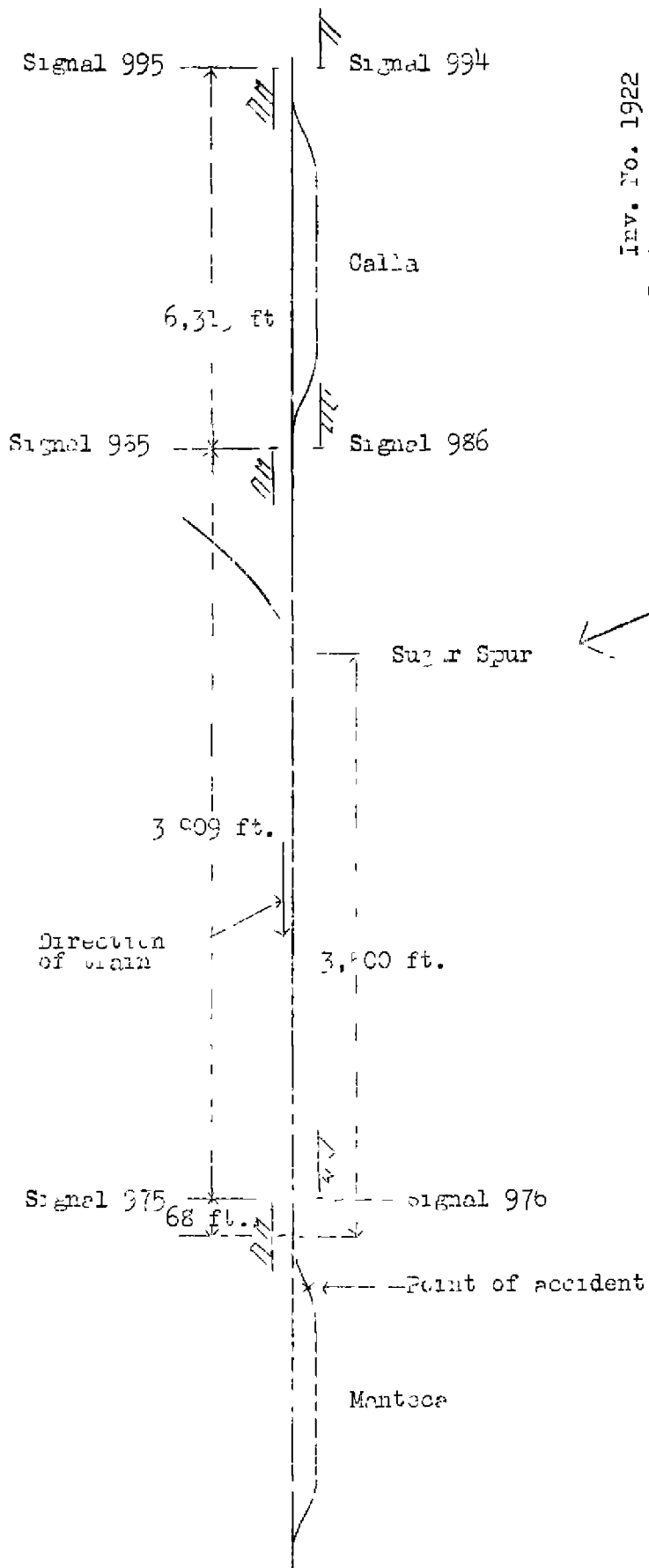
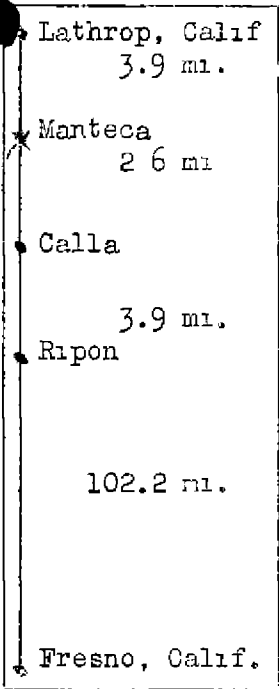
On August 3, 1934, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the line of the Southern Pacific Company at Manteca, Calif., which resulted in the death of 3 employees and 1 trespasser, and the injury of 11 passengers, 1 mail clerk and 1 nontrespasser. The investigation of this accident was held in conjunction with a representative of the Railroad Commission of California.

Location and method of operation

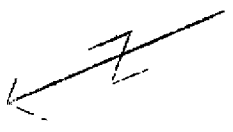
This accident occurred on the Merced Subdivision of the Western Division, which extends between Lathrop and Fresno, Calif., a distance of 112.3 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. There is a passing siding at Manteca approximately 4,000 feet in length which parallels the main track on the south, and the accident occurred at the east switch of this siding, approaching this point from either direction the track is tangent and nearly level for several miles. The east switch leads out the main track through a No. 10 turnout, the switch stand, of the Star type, is located on the south side of the track. The maximum speed permitted for passenger trains is 65 miles per hour.

The signals involved are signals 975, 985 and 995, located 68 feet, 3,977 feet and 10,292 feet, respectively, east of the east switch. These signals are of the 2-arm, 2-position, lower-quadrant type.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 10:30 a.m.



Inv. No. 1922
Southern Pacific Co.,
Manteca, Calif.
Aug. 3, 1934.



Description

East-bound freight Train Extra 2384 consisted of 15 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 2384, and was in charge of Conductor Dornfeld and Engineman Williams. At Lathrop, 3.9 miles west of Manteca, the crew received a copy of a train order authorizing them to work extra between Lathrop and Calla, this latter point being 2.6 miles east of Manteca, until 11:01 a.m., protecting against two following extra trains. Upon arrival at Manteca, at 9:55 a.m., the engine was placed at the west end of the train and the cars were shoved eastward to Calla, Brakeman Gerza being left at the east switch at Manteca with instructions to close the switch and protect against the two following extras. Brakeman Gerza at first closed the switch, but later he opened it again directly in front of west-bound Train No. 55.

West-bound passenger Train No. 55 consisted of 2 express cars, 1 mail and baggage car, 1 mail car, and 3 coaches, in the order named, hauled by engine 2401, and was in charge of Conductor Brown and Engineman Farley. This train departed from Ripon, 6.5 miles from Manteca, at 10:18 a.m., 1 minute late, and was derailed when it entered the passing track at the open switch at Manteca while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 50 and 55 miles per hour.

The engine, tender, the first four cars and the forward truck of the fifth car were derailed to the left. The engine stopped on the side of a fill practically bottom-up with the forward end of the engine 305 feet from the point of derailment; the first car stopped with its forward end beyond the main line, its rear end having struck and partly demolished a building about 50 feet from the track, the second car was upright between the engine and passing track, the third and fourth cars were leaning toward the south, and the fifth car remained upright. The engine and first car were badly damaged. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman.

Summary of evidence

Approaching Manteca Conductor J. W. Brown, of Train No. 55, was in the fifth car and heard the whistle sounded and later felt an emergency application of the brakes, followed almost immediately by a sudden crash and the stopping of the train; he estimated the speed at the time of the accident at 50 miles per hour. There was dense smoke about 100 feet east of the east switch coming from grass being burned by section men on the engineman's side of the right of way; the conductor said a light wind was blowing this smoke across the track and that it may have obscured the engineman's view

of the automatic signal located just east of the switch. Upon examining the switch he found it open, with the lock in the keeper, and signal 975 was in stop position. Brakeman Gerza told him that he had left the switch open and attempted to close it before the train arrived but was unable to reach it in time.

Head Brakeman Hansen corroborated statements of the conductor, while Rear Brakeman G. F. Brown stated that he got off as soon as the train stopped and upon observing smoke to the rear and hearing the exhaust of an approaching engine he hurried back to flag. While returning to the scene of accident with this engine the smoke was so dense that he was unable to see the rear end of his train, making it necessary to walk ahead of the engine and flag through.

Head Brakeman Gerza, of Extra 3384, stated that after his engine ran around the train at Manteca and moved the cars from the siding he rode on the engine until it reached the east switch; where the engineman told him to get off and hold the following trains until the engine returned. He got off with flagging equipment but did not close the switch until about 5 minutes afterwards. After a further interval, thinking that the engine would return soon and on account of smoke in that vicinity, he decided to reopen the switch and set the signals against the extra trains and then proceed westward to protect as a further precaution, he said he would not swear to it but was pretty sure that the east-bound automatic signal just east of the switch was in clear position before he opened the switch. When he had reached a point about seven or eight car lengths west of the switch he started to take his time table from his pocket but about the same time he heard an engine whistle and the exhaust of steam of a train approaching from the east, he could not see the train on account of the smoke, but he knew that it was not his own engine and consequently started running toward the switch but was unable to reach and close it before the train arrived. Brakeman Gerza said the only previous experience he had had in that locality was 8 or 10 trips in August, 1932, and that he was unfamiliar with the time of scheduled trains, although he had looked hurriedly at his time table while at Lethrop and was about to look at it again when he heard the approaching train. He knew that the proper way to handle main track switches was to line and lock them for the main track and leave them secured, but said that the smoke east of the switch caused him to become confused.

Engineman Williams, of Extra 3524, stated that his train entered the passing track at Manteca at the west switch, where the engine was run around the cars and placed on the rear end preparatory to placing the cars on a sugar refinery spur located approximately 3,500 feet east of Manteca. While the

train was being shoved from the passing track he instructed Brakeman Gerze to get off at the east switch, close it, and hold the east-bound extras until the engine returned, Train No. 55 was not mentioned at any time. He did not look back to see whether the brakeman closed the switch, but as soon as his train cleared at Calla and the switch was closed the automatic signals, located just west of the passing track at that point, went to the clear position, indicating that the switch at Manteca was closed at that time; he could not see the signal at Manteca on account of the smoke. He looked at the signals at Calla again while Train No. 55 was passing his own train and they were still in the clear position. Engineman Williams said that Brakeman Gerze had read the order requiring protection against the extra trains and he was of the impression that the brakeman understood what was required, otherwise he would not have left him at Manteca.

Conductor Dornfeld, of Extra 2584, stated that he rode on the leading car from Manteca to the sugar refinery spur, but upon arrival at the spur track he found it filled with cars and they proceeded to Calla in order to clear the schedule of Train No. 55. Conductor Dornfeld communicated with the agent at Manteca to learn what disposition should be made of the cars on the spur track, and as soon as he finished making arrangements with the agent Train No. 55 was approaching. He observed that the west-bound signals at Calla and at Manteca were displaying clear indications, being able to see the latter signal momentarily above the smoke. He had not been able to see the rear end of his train while it was passing through this smoke when leaving Manteca and did not know that Brakeman Gerze remained at that point, but as the signals were in clear position when Train No. 55 passed Calla he knew the switch at Manteca was closed at that time.

Middle Brakeman Dornady, of Extra 2334, stated that as soon as his engine had cleared at Calla and he had closed the switch he observed that both signals at that point were in clear position, and were still clear when Train No. 55 was approaching; he was unable to see the signals at Manteca on account of the smoke. When the passenger train passed the engineman was in his proper position and appeared to be in normal condition. Rear Brakeman Holmes also observed that the signals at both Calla and Manteca were in proceed position before Train No. 55 passed.

Section Foreman Knight stated that during the morning of the accident his crew was engaged in cutting and burning grass and weeds along the right of way from a point about 340 feet to about 1,100 feet east of the passing track. There was a light wind and smoke was blowing across the track, which intermittently obscured the signals, although after the freight

train moved eastward from the passing track he was able to see a brakeman at the east switch, which at that time was open. He looked in that direction several times afterwards and the brakeman still was in that vicinity, and as the switch remained open he thought it was the intention to set the cars off and return the engine to Manteca ahead of Train No. 55. When he heard that train approaching he again looked towards the switch and it was still open, with the brakeman standing on the opposite side of the track about 20 feet from the stand. The brakeman at first appeared to be confused, and then ran across the track and reached for the switch lever, but by that time the train passed between them and obstructed the section foreman's view of the switch. Foreman Knight said that he did not watch the switch continuously after the freight train departed and did not know whether it was closed part of the time before Train No. 55 arrived. He was not in position to flag the passenger train and was too far away from the switch to shout a warning to the brakeman.

Road Foreman of Engines Porter stated that as soon as possible after the accident he examined the engine and found the throttle in light drifting position and the brake valve in emergency position.

Signal Supervisor Starnett stated that he arrived at the scene of accident about 12.50 p.m., and immediately examined the east switch to see if the circuit controller was in proper adjustment. As soon as the track was cleared he tested the circuit by opening and closing the switch and the signals at Manteca and Cille functioned properly.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by a switch being opened directly in front of an approaching train, for which Head Brakeman Gerza, of Extra 2334, is responsible.

According to the statements of Brakeman Gerza, he was instructed by the engineman to get off at the east switch and hold two east-bound extra trains, which the crew had an order to protect against, until the engine returned. He closed the switch a few minutes after his engine departed, but shortly afterwards, because of the smoke from burning grass in that locality, which obscured the view, it occurred to him that by opening the switch the signals would be set against the extra trains and afford better protection, he was not positive what indications were displayed by the signals but he opened the switch and started westward with flagging equipment, he had gone only a short distance from the switch when he heard a

train approaching from the east and he hurried back for the purpose of closing the switch but was unable to reach it before the train arrived. Brakeman Gerza did not know the time of Train No. 55 at Manteca, and was about to check his time table when he heard the train approaching.

These statements by Brakeman Gerza indicate that he was not properly qualified for his duties as a flagman, notwithstanding that he was a man with over 14 years' experience. In the first place in accordance with the rules and his instructions from the engineman he should have immediately closed the switch and gone back to flag so as to be in position to stop the following extras; secondly, before opening the switch, not being acquainted with the territory or the times of the various trains, he should have consulted his time table to ascertain whether a scheduled train was due and, thirdly, had he looked at the automatic signals near the switch he would have known that a train was approaching from the east. The evidence is conclusive that the signals at Calla were in proceed position when Train No. 55 passed that point, indicating that the switch at Manteca then was closed; and it therefore follows that Train No. 55 was already in the block at the time Brakeman Gerza opened the switch. The evidence indicated that the smoke along the right of way east of the switch was sufficiently dense to prevent the engine crew of Train No. 55 from observing the position of the west-bound signal at that point, or the open switch, in time to avert the accident.

On October 26, 1933, there was a rear-end collision on this railroad near Monterey, Calif., caused by improper flag protection while a train was standing on the main track on the time of a following superior train; it developed in that investigation that the rear brakeman was operating in territory under rules with which he was not familiar and in our report covering that investigation it was stated that it was evident he was not qualified to perform the duties of the position to which he was assigned. The accident here under investigation involves another employee who was not familiar with the territory in which he was operating and whose actions indicated that he did not have a clear idea as to his duties and responsibilities or the method to follow in carrying them out. Under the conditions existing at the present time, with practically all employees being men with years of experience, it is unusual to find any employee not qualified properly to perform his duties and the supervising officials of this company should look into this matter immediately and make sure that their employees have a proper understanding of their duties and the rules applicable thereto and that those duties and rules are properly carried out.

Respectfully submitted,
W. J. PATTERSON,
Director.