

Inv-2145

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

ACCIDENT ON THE
SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD

SELMA, CALIF.

FEBRUARY 12, 1937

INVESTIGATION NO. 2145

SUMMARY

Inv-2145

Railroad:	Southern Pacific Co.
Date:	February 12, 1937
Location:	Selma, Calif.
Kind of accident:	Derailment
Train involved:	Passenger
Train number:	No. 26
Engine number:	2479
Consist:	12 cars
Speed:	40 m.p.h.
Track:	Tangent; slight descending grade
Weather:	Cloudy
Time:	1 a.m.
Casualties:	Two killed; three injured
Cause:	Train struck automobile which had been driven along track by intoxicated driver until it became wedged between rails at switch

April 1, 1937.

To the Commission:

On February 12, 1937, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the line of the Southern Pacific Company as a result of striking an automobile on the track at Selma, Calif., which resulted in the death of two employees, and the injury of one passenger, one person carried under contract, and one trespasser. The investigation of this accident was made in conjunction with a representative of the Railroad Commission of California.

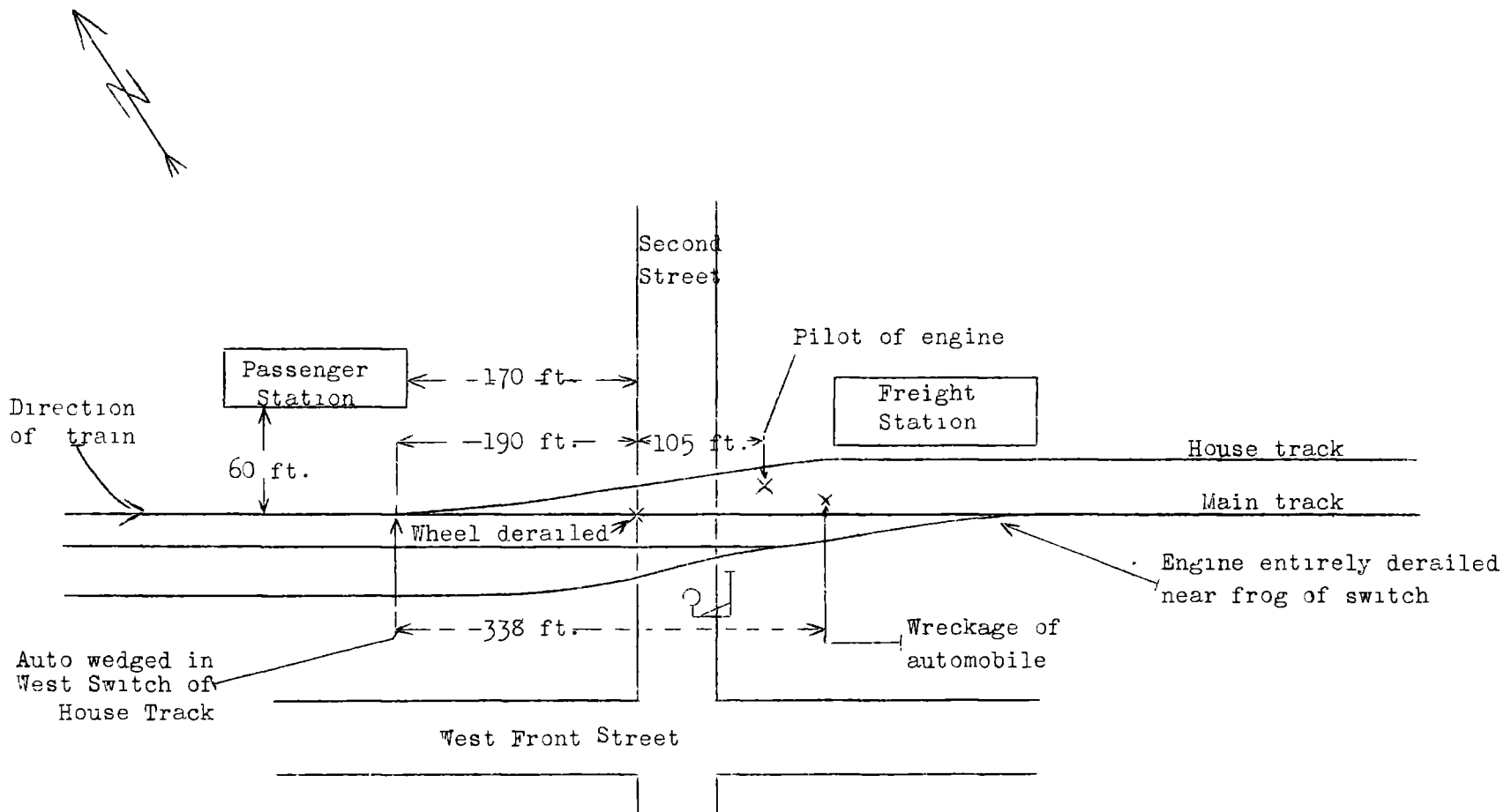
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Fresno Subdivision of the San Joaquin Division which extends between Fresno Yard and Bakersfield, Calif., a distance of 111.1 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The automobile was struck at the west house-track switch, directly opposite the east end of the passenger station at Selma; approaching this point from the west, the track is tangent for more than 22 miles, while the grade in the immediate vicinity is slightly descending. The station at Selma is located on the north side of the track and approximately 60 feet therefrom, while a street known as Second Street crosses the track at right angles east of the station, the distance between the east end of the station and the west edge of Second Street being about 170 feet. The west house-track switch is a facing-point switch for east-bound trains and leads off the main track toward the left; the point of the switch is approximately 190 feet from the west edge of Second Street.

The weather was cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred about 1 a.m.

Description

Train No. 26, an east-bound passenger train, consisted of two baggage cars, one coach, one chair car, two Pullman tourist cars, five Pullman sleeping cars, and one observation car, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 2479, and was in charge of Conductor Elterman and Engineman Mills. This train passed Calwa Tower, the last open office, 3.6 miles east of Fresno and 11.6 miles west of Selma, at 12:45 a.m., according to the train sheet, 50 minutes late, and was derailed



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after colliding head-on with the automobile at Selma while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 40 miles per hour.

The automobile involved in this accident was an 8-cylinder Pontiac business coupe, 1936 model, owned and operated by F. K. Ritchie, of Porterville, Calif., who was accompanied by his wife. It had been driven westward along the track until it became wedged between the rails at the west house-track switch and then stalled, the occupants having left the vehicle just prior to the accident.

Engine 2479 was derailed and stopped on its left side diagonally across the house track with its head end 909 feet beyond the point of the switch. The first six cars and the front truck of the seventh car were derailed, but all of the cars remained practically upright. The front portion of the automobile was demolished, and the wreckage of the machine was carried eastward by engine 2479 for a distance of 338 feet, stopping on the left side of the main track opposite the freight station. The employees killed were the engineman and the fireman.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Elterman, who was in the third car, said that after sounding the station whistle signal, Selma being a flag stop for this train, the engineman reduced speed so as to be able to stop in case there were passengers to be picked up, and then there was an emergency application of the brakes, followed shortly by the derailment of the car in which he was riding; he estimated the speed at the time to have been about 40 miles per hour. A few minutes afterwards the conductor saw the engineman as the latter was being taken away from the engine; at that time the engineman was conscious, and on asking him what had happened the engineman replied that they had struck an automobile on the other side of the crossing. Conductor Elterman then went back toward the rear of his train and saw the wrecked automobile, which appeared to have been struck squarely in front; he also saw a driver's license which showed the driver to have been 41 years of age. The conductor then continued westward and found that the automobile had been at the west house-track switch, but he did not see the persons who had been occupying it. Conductor Elterman further stated that he had seen Engineman Mills prior to the departure of the train from Fresno and that he appeared to be in normal condition, while after leaving Fresno the engine-

man had made a running test of the air brakes; speed was reduced for the purpose of picking up an order at Calwa Tower, but no stop had been made prior to the accident.

Head Brakeman Cummings, also in the third car, was looking out in order to ascertain the position of the train-order signal at Selma, and after seeing the signal he saw fire at the head end of the train, realized that they had struck something, and got back inside out of the way of possible flying wreckage; his statements concerning the application of the brakes practically agreed with those of Conductor Elterman, while the statements of Rear Brakeman Sessions added nothing of importance except that when back flagging after the accident, the visibility was such that he was able to see the headlight of the engine hauling the wreck train for a distance of about 2 miles.

Engine Inspector Uhlig, on duty at Oakland, said he inspected engine 2479 on the pit before its departure on the night of February 11; the requirements as to pilots are that they must be at least 3 inches and not more than 6 inches above the rails, and he said the pilot on engine 2479 was about 4 inches above the rails and in first-class condition. Air Brake Inspector Wilson, at Oakland, who inspected the air-brake equipment on engine 2479, said it was entirely new equipment and in excellent condition. Machinist Rowland, on duty at Fresno, said the engine is cut off the train at that point to take water, inspect boxes, test air, etc.; 15 minutes are allowed for this purpose and on the day of the accident the train arrived at 12:16 a.m. and departed at 12:35 a.m., nothing wrong having been discovered; Machinist Rowland also said that during this time he had a helper to assist in servicing the engine. The four car inspectors who examined the cars in the train at Fresno said they found the equipment to be in good condition.

G. C. Guerry, a resident of Selma, stated that in company with his wife he had driven his automobile to the station for the purpose of meeting his daughter, who was expected to arrive as a passenger on Train No. 26, and that he parked his car close to the west end of the station. They had been sitting there for some time, the train being late, when they saw an automobile drive up to the point where the accident afterwards occurred and stop; at the time they thought it belonged to a night policeman. Mr. Guerry did not pay any particular attention to the car, not knowing that it was on the track, and about 10 minutes afterwards he heard the whistle of the train, got out of his automobile, and started across the plat-

form toward the track. When about half way across the platform he saw that the automobile in question was on the track and began to run toward it, and about that time he saw a woman jump out from the right side and also saw a man on the left side, although he did not know whether the man had jumped out or had been standing there. Mr. Guerry also stated that the headlights of the automobile had been burning all the time it was on the track, that he had not seen any one in or around it until they got out just before the crash, and that he did not know where it came from or see it until it had stopped on the track, at which time he could see only its front end. It further appeared from the statements of Mr. Guerry that he had not noticed any sound from the motor of the automobile to indicate that the occupants were trying to get it off the track, but Mr. Guerry said the night was somewhat chilly and that the windows of his car were snut. Subsequent to the accident Mr. Guerry saw the man and woman near the rear end of the train and they inquired whether any one had been killed; at that time he did not notice anything about the man to indicate that he was intoxicated; however, he was not closer to him than 10 or 12 feet.

Police Officer Frost, a resident of Selma, said that after reaching the scene of the accident he saw Mr. Ritchie, who acknowledged that he was the owner of the automobile and that he had been driving it; seeing that he was drunk, in fact so drunk that the officer had to take a card out of his pocket in order to find out his name, Officer Frost arrested him, and after placing him in jail Officer Frost returned to the scene and arrested Mrs. Ritchie, who also was drunk. Officer Frost said that both of these people were told that the accident was serious, but that they were so intoxicated they did not seem to worry very much about it. It also appeared from the statements of the policeman that he understood Mr. and Mrs. Ritchie had been at an inn located on the south side of the tracks between First and Second Streets, and he thought it probable that after leaving that point they proceeded on Second Street and then turned on the track toward First Street.

Dr. J. H. Wagner, a resident of Selma, said he was summoned to the scene of the accident and that subsequently, about 2:50 a.m., he participated with Dr. Morgan in the examination of Mr. and Mrs. Ritchie for the purpose of determining whether they were intoxicated, and in the course of this examination samples of blood were obtained from each of them and sent to a laboratory in Fresno for examination. The report made by the laboratory showed that the blood of Mr. Ritchie had an alcoholic content of 0.152 percent, while that of Mrs. Ritchie had an alcoholic content of 0.181 percent;

0.15 percent was considered by the laboratory as sufficient to indicate drunkenness. Dr. Wagner also stated that his own personal examination and observations of Mr. and Mrs. Ritchie led to the conclusion that each of them was drunk, Mrs. Ritchie apparently being less affected although the analysis had indicated that her blood had the higher alcoholic content. In connection with these statements, the report made by the laboratory stated that inasmuch as the blood was drawn about 2 or 3 hours after the last drink was taken, the alcoholic content would have been higher at the time the automobile was driven on the track.

Examination of the track and equipment indicated that when the train struck the automobile the metal pilot of engine 2479 was broken away from the knee bracket and hanger on the right side of the pilot beam, and that when this sagging pilot reached the west edge of the crossing at Second Street the toe of the pilot contacted the sidewalk and resulted in the flange of the left front engine-truck wheel mounting the rail while the right wheel dropped between the rails. The left wheel continued on the running surface of the rail for a distance of about 40 feet and then dropped off on the outside, both wheels continuing on the ties after passing over the crossing. The pilot finally became entirely detached from the engine and was found on the left side of the track 105 feet beyond the first mark of derailment, while the driving wheels and balance of the train began to be derailed at the frog of a trailing-point switch located a short distance farther to the eastward. Beyond this point the track was torn up for a distance of about 400 feet.

The investigation did not develop definitely how the driver of the automobile reached the crossing at Second Street, but there were automobile tracks which extended from the west side of the crossing directly to the point where the automobile was lodged in the switch. At a point 29 feet 6 inches from the point of the switch the tie plates and spike heads had been polished by the turning of the rear wheels, apparently while an effort was being made to force the car through the switch in a westerly direction; there also was a depression where the right rear wheel had dug into the dirt as it was revolving, while pieces of rubber were found on the flanges of the rail, as well as rubber streaks along the head of the rail. Subsequently the driver of the automobile was indicted on two counts on a charge of manslaughter.

Discussion

The evidence in this case showed that the automobile involved was being driven westward on the main track and that it continued until it became wedged between the rails at a trailing-point switch. This was about 10 minutes prior to the arrival of the train, but the only eye-witness did not know that the automobile was on the track, while the occupants apparently did not realize their position and tried to force the automobile through the switch; the result was that no warning of danger was given to the crew of the approaching train. There was no evidence of derailment prior to the collision with the automobile, the first marks of derailed wheels appearing on the running surface of the left rail at the edge of the crossing, about 190 feet east of the point of switch, and apparently the toe of the metal pilot, which had become loosened as a result of the impact, contacted the sidewalk at the street crossing and resulted in the left front engine-truck wheel mounting the rail. The two occupants of the automobile were arrested, and an examination made by doctors about 2 hours afterwards indicated that at that time each of the two occupants was intoxicated; in addition, a laboratory analysis of samples of their blood showed that the alcoholic content in each case was more than sufficient to indicate an intoxicated condition.

Conclusion

This accident was caused by the fact that the train struck an automobile which had been driven along the track by an intoxicated driver until it became wedged between the rails at a switch.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON,

Director.