

Inv-2211

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

WASHINGTON

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

ACCIDENT ON THE
SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD

TURLOCK, CALIF.

OCTOBER 23, 1937.

INVESTIGATION NO. 2211

SUMMARY

Inv-2211

Railroad: Southern Pacific
Date: October 23, 1937.
Location Turlock, Calif.
Kind of accident: Truck struck by train on grade crossing, train derailed.
Train involved: Passenger ; Gasoline tank truck.
Train number: First 95
Engine number: 2422
Consist: 8 cars
Speed: 35-50 m.p.h. : Unknown
Track: Tangent and practically level.
Highway: Paralleled the tracks approximately 45 feet south, then crossed the tracks at right angles.
Weather: Clear
Time: 9:05 a.m.
Casualties: 3 killed and 1 injured
Cause: Truck driven upon railroad crossing at grade directly in front of approaching train.

November 23, 1937.

To the Commission:

On October 23, 1937, there was a derailment of a passenger train as a result of striking a gasoline tank truck at a grade crossing on the line of the Southern Pacific Company at Turlock, Calif., which resulted in the death of the truck driver, one passenger on the truck and one railroad employee, and the injury of one railroad employee. The investigation of this accident was made in conjunction with a representative of the Railroad Commission of California.

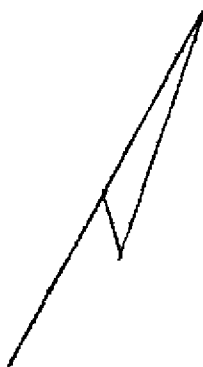
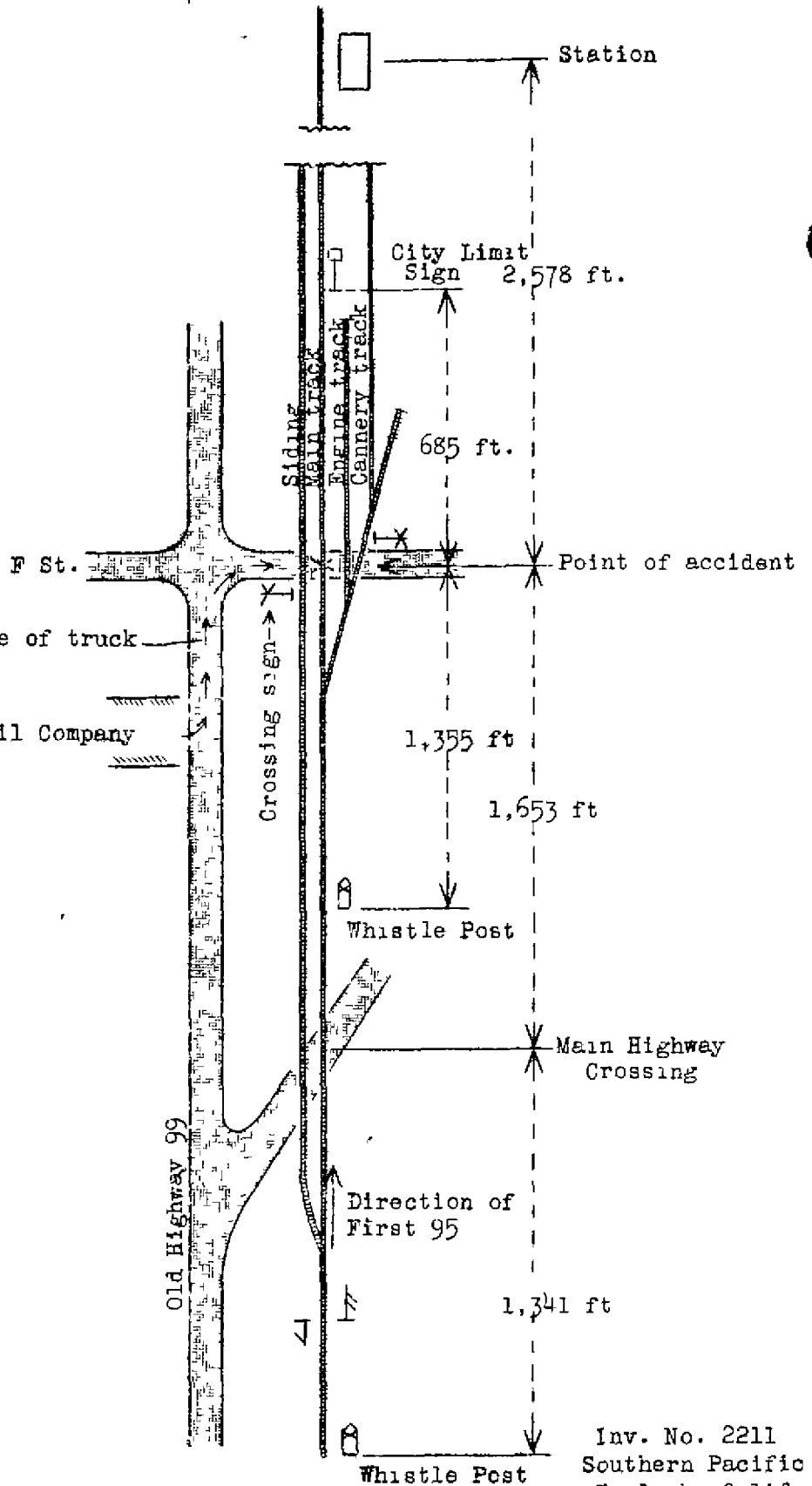
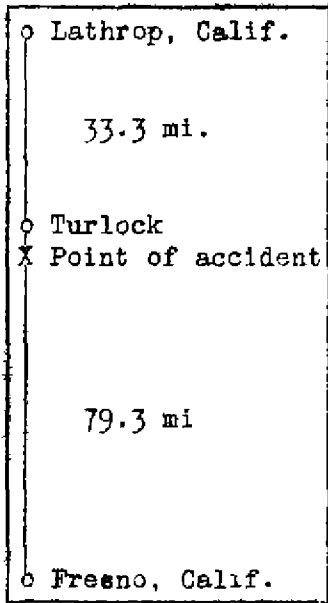
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Merced Subdivision of the Western Division which extends between Lathrop and Fresno, Calif., a distance of 112.6 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 accident occurred at F Street crossing, located 2,578 feet east of the station at Turlock. There are four tracks at this point: from south to north, a siding, the main track, an engine track and a cannery track. Approaching the crossing from the east the track is tangent for several miles, this tangent extending for several miles beyond. The track is practically level.

F Street extends north and south and crosses the tracks at right angles and intersects Old Highway 99 which parallels the tracks approximately 45 feet on the south. The crossing is 30 feet in width and constructed of an asphalt compound, with planks on each side of each rail. The street is level. Standard cross-bar signs are located on each side of this crossing; the sign governing north-bound traffic is located to the right of the highway and 27 feet from the center line of the siding, the first track encountered, or 40 feet from the center line of the main track. There are no crossing signals to indicate the approach of trains.

A row of trees and two lines of telegraph poles are situated between the siding and Old Highway 99; however, a clear view can be had of a west-bound train by the driver of a north-bound vehicle at a point 25 feet from the south rail of the siding for a distance of 1,700 feet, and at a point 14 feet from the siding an unobstructed view can be had for several miles.

Section 576 of the Motor Vehicle Code of the State of California provides in part:



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The driver of any motor truck carrying explosive substances or inflammable liquids as a cargo or part of a cargo, before crossing at grade any track or tracks of a steam railway, interurban or suburban electric railway, shall stop such vehicle not less than ten nor more than fifty feet from the nearest rail of such track and while so stopped shall listen, and look in both directions along such track, for any approaching railway train, before traversing such crossing.

Special instructions contained in the timetable restrict the speed of passenger trains to 65 miles per hour. In compliance with an ordinance another timetable special instruction restricts the speed of all trains to 15 miles per hour through the city limits of Turlock; however, the city-limit sign is located 685 feet west of F Street. A whistle post is located 1,355 feet east of F Street, and the main highway crossing, where new highway No. 99 crosses the tracks from the north side of the right-of-way to the south side, is located 1,653 feet east of F Street, the whistle post for this crossing being located 1,341 feet east thereof. This crossing is protected by wigwag signals.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 9:05 a.m.

Description

First 95, a west-bound passenger train, consisted of one mail car, one baggage and express car, two coaches, 1 combination coach and dining car, one coach, one deadhead club car and one headhead dining car, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 2422, and was in charge of Conductor Lar Rieu and Enginemen Runyon. This train departed from Livingston, the last open telegraph office, 10.2 miles from Turlock, at 8:48 a.m., according to the train sheet, 15 minutes late, and on approaching Turlock struck a gasoline tank truck while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 35 and 50 miles per hour.

The truck involved was a Ford V-8, 1936 model, with an enclosed cab, and equipped with a 3-compartment tank having a capacity of 1,030 gallons; it carried enclosed containers on the sides for lubricating oil. At the time of the accident the truck was loaded with 915 gallons of gasoline and 5-gallon containers of lubricating oil. This truck was owned by Ed Jorgenson, a wholesale dealer operating the Goodrich Oil Company with headquarters on the south side of Old Highway 99 about 300 feet east of F Street. The truck involved was driven by V.F. Norton, accompanied by F.S. Lopes, and had just left the yard of the Goodrich Oil

Company and proceeded northward on F Street behind another truck which had left the Goodrich Oil Company at the same time. The first truck cleared the crossing but the second truck was struck by First 95.

The truck was demolished and the gasoline which was sprayed over the engine, tender and first three cars became ignited and the resultant explosion hurled the gasoline tank 75 feet southwest of the crossing. The truck chassis with the cab and its occupants were carried on the front end of the engine for a distance of approximately 1,092 feet to the point where the engine stopped. The engine pilot was bent down and some part of the truck was forced down under the pilot and engine truck, causing the derailment of the engine truck 746 feet west of the crossing. When the derailed left front wheel struck the left switch point of a cross-over switch a short distance beyond, the switch points were opened sufficiently for the engine to enter the cross-over and the engine stopped on its left side 275 feet beyond the switch point. The tender stopped on its left side at right angles to the engine, and the first three cars were derailed but remained in upright position, the first car stopping on the roadbed of the siding south of the main track; the second car stopped across the siding and main track, and the front truck of the third car was headed toward the cross-over with its rear truck on the main track. The engine, tender and first car were badly damaged, and the second and third cars less seriously damaged; the fourth and fifth cars were also slightly damaged by fire. The employee killed was the fireman and the employee injured was the engineman.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Runyon stated that the usual air-brake test was made before leaving Fresno and the brakes functioned properly en route. On approaching the main highway crossing at Turlock, located 1,653 feet east of F Street, he made a service application of the air brakes and was operating a drifting throttle, intending to make a further reduction in order to comply with the speed restriction of 15 miles per hour through Turlock. He sounded the crossing whistle signal for this crossing and also sounded the whistle signal for the F Street crossing. On approaching the F Street crossing the speed was about 40 miles per hour and he saw a gasoline truck proceed across the tracks at a low rate of speed; he was about 700 feet from the rear of this truck when it cleared the crossing; he remarked to the fireman that the driver was taking a chance. The fireman

answered him, then shouted a warning that another truck was coming. Engineman Runyon immediately applied the air brakes in emergency, the crash followed and they were enveloped in flames. The automatic bell on his engine was ringing at the time of the accident. He stated that he did not see the second truck, and thought that the first truck was about two-thirds of a city block away when the train struck the second truck. After the accident and before being taken to the hospital he heard some one remark that after the second truck started from the Goodrich Oil Company another driver ran after the truck and climbed in on the seat beside the driver and this took the driver's attention from the crossing.

Conductor Lar Rieu stated that on approaching Turlock he was in the third car; he felt a service application of the air brakes after passing over the main highway crossing and then in two or three seconds he felt a heavy application of the brakes and the train was in flames. He estimated the speed of the train to have been 45 miles per hour at the time of the accident, stating that the engineman had reduced speed from 55 miles per hour and that he continued to reduce the speed in that vicinity to bring it down to the speed restriction through the city of Turlock. He heard the engineman sound the whistle signal for the first crossing encountered and then he heard a warning whistle.

Head Brakeman Davis, who was in the fourth car, stated that he felt two applications of the air brakes, the second application being about the time they struck the truck. He heard the crossing whistle signal for the main highway crossing, but that was the only whistle he heard. He estimated the speed to have been 35 or 40 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Flagman Leslie stated that the speed was reduced on approaching the main highway crossing and he heard the whistle signal sounded for that crossing; he felt an emergency application of the air brakes a few seconds prior to the collision.

Railway Postal Clerk Brown stated that the engineman sounded the whistle signal as usual on approaching Turlock. It was his impression that in the series of whistles there was one as they crossed the main highway crossing, but he could not remember whether or not the whistle was being sounded at the time the train struck the truck. The speed was not over 50 miles per hour at the main highway crossing and the brakes were applied in emergency an instant before the impact.

Express Messenger Sopher, who was in the second car, stated that he heard the crossing whistle for the main highway but he did not recall whether or not another whistle signal was sounded as he was then busy in moving express matter.

Charles Hawkins, a resident of Turlock, stated that he was standing in front of his place of business located on Old Highway 99 and about 500 feet east of F Street when First 95 passed. He heard a peculiar whistle and on looking up he saw a truck on the crossing and remarked that the truck was going to have a close call. The train then obscured his view of the truck and he heard an explosion; he thought the train had struck the rear end of the truck, but later learned that it was another truck the train had struck. He said he did not see the second truck. Mr Hawkins further stated that he heard the train whistle twice prior to the warning whistle, first for the main highway crossing and again after passing it.

Mrs. Ida Nelson, who resides on Old Highway 99 at D Street, approximately 800 or 900 feet west of F Street, stated that she witnessed the occurrence of the accident. She did not know what it was that attracted her attention, possibly the train whistle, but when she looked toward F Street she saw the truck proceeding upon the crossing in front of the approaching train. She thought the truck was between Old Highway 99 and the tracks when she first saw it and it did not stop.

Floyd Elliott stated that he was working near the railroad right-of-way, about 50 feet north of the main track and opposite the Goodrich Oil Company. He saw the two oil trucks leave the Goodrich yard, and after turning north at F Street he saw the first truck stop at the railroad crossing but was unable to say whether the second truck stopped for the crossing. He thought the train was travelling at a higher rate of speed than usual and he saw it strike the truck at about its center. The engineman did not sound the whistle prior to the time he reached the crossing, when he then sounded a short sharp blast. Earl J. Jennings, who was working with Floyd Elliott, stated that he has seen this same passenger train pass every day for the past two weeks and on the day of the accident it was traveling at a higher rate of speed than usual and the whistle signal was not sounded until just as the train struck the truck.

Observations of Commission's inspectors

A traffic check for a 24-hour period at the crossing involved showed a total of 508 motor vehicles and a total of 20 trains. It was observed that all oil and gasoline trucks using the crossing during that time stopped before traversing the crossing in either direction. It was also noted that the speed restriction of 15 miles per hour through the city limits of Turlock was generally disregarded by both passenger and freight trains.

Discussion

While the statements of the members of the train crew and the several witnesses of the accident are conflicting as to the extent the whistle signals were sounded as the train approached Turlock, the weight of evidence indicates that the crossing whistle signal was sounded for the main highway crossing, located 1,653 feet east of the point of accident, that the whistle was still being sounded as the train passed over that crossing, and that a blast was sounded just as the engine was about to collide with the truck. The speed had been reduced to approximately 40 or 45 miles per hour at the time of the accident; one truck had just cleared the crossing when the fireman saw a second truck proceed upon the crossing, at which time he warned the engineer who placed the brake valve in emergency position practically at the time of the collision.

The two trucks were seen leaving the Goodrich Oil Company plant a short distance from F Street and the first truck stopped at the crossing, but the second truck was not observed by the various witnesses before it proceeded upon the crossing, and as the driver and the other occupant were killed in the accident it is not known whether or not the truck stopped before proceeding upon the crossing as required by the motor vehicle code of the State of California. However, had the truck stopped and the driver looked in either direction it is believed he would have seen the approaching train, as the view is unobstructed for several miles at a point 14 feet from the south rail of the siding. It is possible that the driver's attention may have been diverted by the other occupant of the truck or by the fact that he was closely following another truck.

Conclusion

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

Recommendation

In view of the amount of traffic, it is recommended that crossing signals be provided at this point to give warning when a train is approaching.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON

Director.

