INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING AN ACCIDENT ON THE ST.LOUIS-SAN FRANCISCO RAILWAY AT NEODESHA, KANSAS, ON MAY 16, 1933.

July 22, 1933

To the Commission:

On May 16, 1933, there was a derailment of a freight train on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway at Neodesha, Kansas, which resulted in the injury of two employees.

Location and method of operation

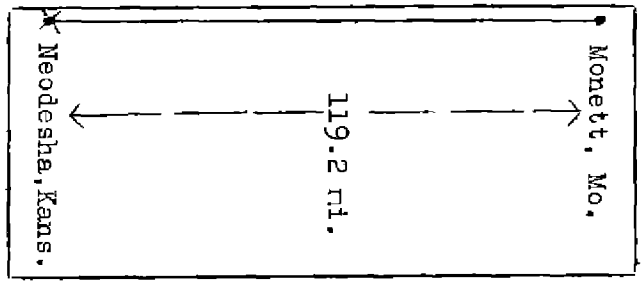
This accident occurred on the Carthage Sub-Division of the Northern Division, which extends between Monett, Mo., and Neodesha, Kansas, a distance of 119.2 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The yard tracks at Neodesha are located north of the main track and the passing track is east of the yard tracks and parallels the main track on the south; it is 2,045 feet in length. The accident occurred on the passing track at a derail located 195 feet west of the east switch; approaching this point from the west, beginning at the west switch, there is a reverse curve approximately 425 feet in length and then the passing track is tangent for a distance of about 800 feet, following which it bears gradually to the left a distance of about 625 feet to the derail, a distance of about 200 feet. The grade on the passing track is slightly descending for east-bound trains.

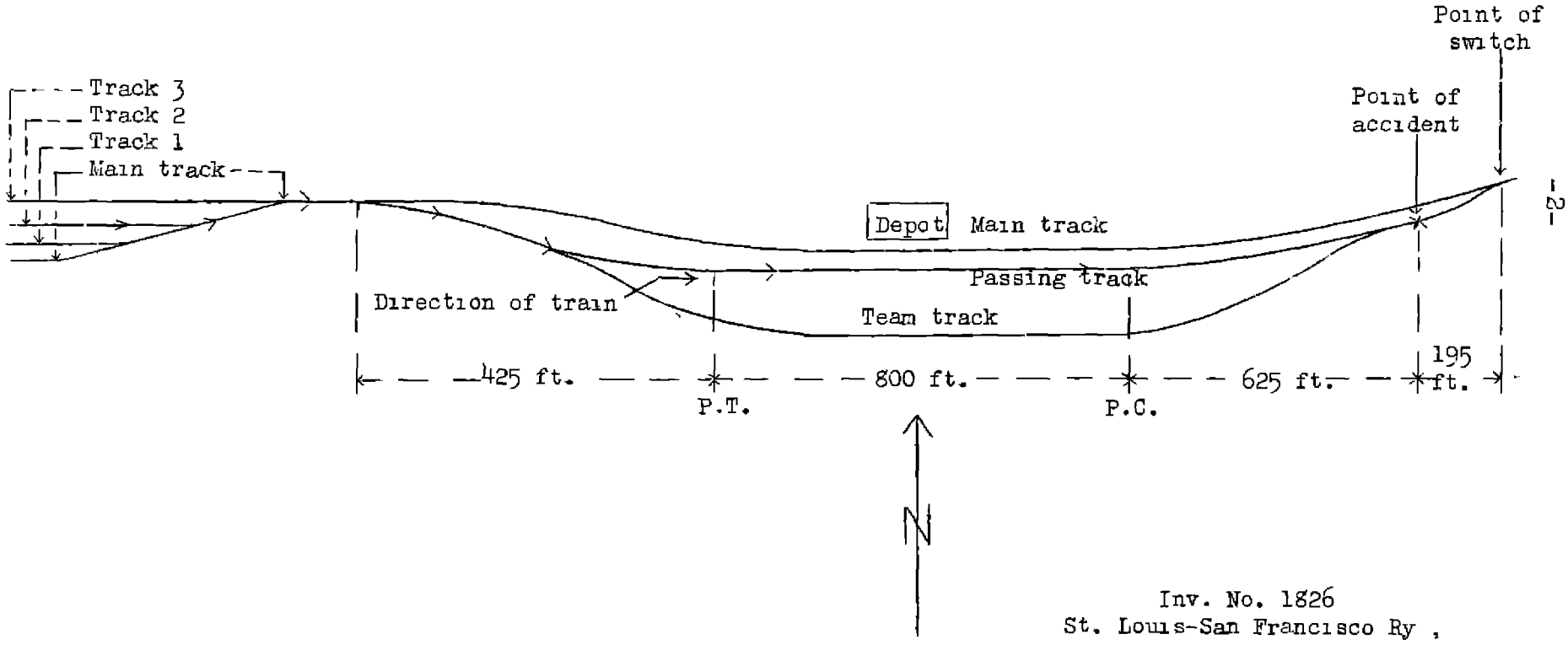
The passing track is laid with 75-pound rails, 30 feet in length, with an average of 22 ties to the rail length, and is ballasted with cinders; it is maintained in fair condition.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 3:10 a.m.

Description

East-bound freight train No. 154 consisted of 13 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1339, and was in charge of Conductor Wilson and Engineman Rea. This train started from yard track 2 at 3:03 a.m., 1 hour and 15 minutes late, entered the main track at the east switch of this track and moved over the main track to the west switch of the passing track, a distance of 397 feet, and then entered the passing track, the switch being open and the light displaying a red indication. The train continued eastward on the passing track until it encountered the derail near the east switch, where it was derailed while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 10 and 18 miles per hour.





Inv. No. 1826
St. Louis-San Francisco Ry ,
Neodesha, Kansas
May 16, 1933

The engine, tender, and the forward truck of the first car were derailed, the engine stopping on its right side with the forward end 112 feet east of the derail, while the tender and first car remained upright. The engine was badly damaged and the tender sustained slight damage. The employees injured were the fireman and head brakeman.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Rea stated that his engine was equipped with an electric headlight, which was burning, and that he had the side windows and the clear-vision window open on his side of the cab and was maintaining a lookout ahead, but the cylinder cocks were open while approaching the west passing-track switch and the condensation of steam resulted in his failure to see either the switch lamp, which was on the fireman's side, or the position of the switch points. He also failed to see the switch lamp at the switch connecting the team track with the passing track, or the derail sign opposite the derail, and was unaware that the train had entered the passing track and was moving over that track until the engine overturned and he got out of the cab, crossed over to the opposite side of the engine and saw the main track. He had had no conversation with the fireman or head brakeman after the train departed and they did not say anything about the track on which the train was moving; he did, however, feel the brakes apply just before the train was derailed and he reached for the brake valve but before he could apply the brakes from the engine the accident had occurred. He estimated the speed of the train at the time of the accident at from 8 to 12 miles per hour. He had never before found the west passing-track switch open and the train involved was never moved through that track on its departure from the yard; he also said that under normal conditions he could have seen the lamp on this switch a distance of 500 or 600 feet.

Fireman Fetters stated that from the time the engine was coupled to the train until the accident occurred he was engaged in operating the stoker and in other duties in connection with firing. He did not see the switch lamp at the west passing-track switch and did not know his train had entered that track, the alinement of which was about the same as the main track, although just after the train started he looked out to see if a highway crossing was clear. He was still on the deck working with the fire and his first knowledge that the train had not been moving on the main track was when he investigated after the accident. He did not discuss the movement after departing and felt no brake application prior to the derailment.

Head Brakeman Stapp stated that he assisted in handling the switches while the engine was being moved from the roundhouse to the train on track 2 but was unable to say whether the engine entered the west end of the passing track in making this movement. As soon as the train started leaving the yard he boarded the engine, read the train orders while standing on the deck

of the engine, then climbed on the seatbox on the fireman's side, about the time the engine reached the station, and closed the front window to keep cinders from blowing into the cab, and had been riding in this position only about 30 seconds when the engine was derailed. He was of the opinion that the engineman, who appeared to be in normal condition, was maintaining a proper lookout, particularly in view of the fact that the whistle had been sounded for two crossings before the accident occurred. He paid no attention to the indications of the switch lamps or the derail sign near the east passing-track switch, as the switches were always set for the main track when a train was leaving the yard and if anything unusual was occurring it would be discovered by either the engineman or fireman, although he admitted that it was his primary duty to maintain a lookout ahead while moving through yard limits and if any irregular conditions existed he was required to call them to the attention of the engine crew. He also said that he did not realize that the train had entered an open switch because there were various curves in the main track in that vicinity and the movement involved in entering the switch would not seem unusual. He estimated the speed of the train at the time of the accident at 18 miles per hour.

Conductor Wilson stated that the engineman appeared to be normal in every respect when he delivered the train orders to him before departing. As soon as the train moved out on the main track he watched a switchman close the switch leading from track 2 and then entered the caboose, paying no further attention to the operation of the train until the rear end neared the station, approximately 700 feet from the west passing-track switch, when he went out on the front caboose platform for the purpose of learning if the operator had any further orders for the crew. He then noticed that the train was not moving on the main track, but thought at the time that some arrangement had been made between the yard crew and his own engine crew to run the train around a switching movement on the main track. He kept on the alert, however, and as soon as he discovered no red lights at the east end of the passing track he immediately applied the brakes in emergency. The train was then traveling 8 or 10 miles an hour but the brakes took hold and reduced the speed to some extent before the engine struck the derail; he thought the train moved only a distance of four or five car lengths from the time the brakes were applied until the accident occurred.

Rear Brakeman Armstrong stated that his first knowledge of anything unusual was the peculiar motion of the caboose as though it was not moving on the main track. Shortly afterwards the conductor and he went on the front platform and it was then discovered that the train was moving on the passing track, and the conductor applied the brakes. About 10 or 15 minutes later he went back to the west passing-track switch and found the switch lamp burning and displaying a red indication, although it was somewhat dim.

Switch Foreman Horner stated that his crew moved a cut of cars from the passing track through the west switch at about 2:30 a.m., and that this was the last time the switch was used prior to the departure of train No. 154. At the time the movement was made the switch was left open while the cars were being switched in the yard and it was then intended to return and close it. He said that he has been employed as engine foreman at Neodesha for the past three years, working practically every night, and it had been his practice to handle this particular switch in the same manner as on the night of the accident, having in mind that if an east-bound train was ready to depart before a member of his crew returned, the crew of that train would close the switch. He could not recall any instance when train No. 154 had stopped to close this switch while leaving the yard, but said that if the switch was open the crew would close it when bringing the engine from the roundhouse. He knew the rules require that all main-track switches be lined and locked for the main track, but did not think the rule applied in this instance as protection is required only against first-class trains within yard limits. While returning to the east end of the yard about 30 or 40 minutes after the accident occurred he observed the west passing-track switch lamp displaying a red indication; he was eight or nine car lengths from the switch and considered it to be as good as the average light.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch, and by the failure of any one on the engine of train No. 154 to observe the switch lamp indication or to maintain a proper lookout.

Train No. 154 entered the passing track and moved over this track until it encountered the derail near the east switch, without any member of the crew on the engine knowing that the train was on the passing track until the accident occurred. The engineman said that steam from the cylinder cocks interfered with the view, the fireman was busy operating the stoker from the time the train departed, and the head brakeman first read the orders and then got on the seatbox, after the train had headed into the open switch, depending on the engine crew to operate the train safely through the yard. If any of these employees had been paying proper attention to the operation of their train, the accident would have been averted.

The rules provide that the proper position for main track switches, when not in use, is set for the main track and locked, and a switch must not be left open for a following train unless in charge of a trainman of such train. The engine foreman of the night switching crew working in the yard admitted that he had left the switch open, it being his intention to

close the switch later providing it was not closed by a road crew before that time. He said that this procedure had been followed for some time as it expedited switching movements, although he was familiar with the rule requiring main-track switches to be closed and locked. This operation, which was purely one of convenience, was a contributing factor to the cause of the accident; the requirements of the rules are plain, and there is no excuse for ignoring them in any such manner.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND

Director