

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
TEXAS AND PACIFIC RAILWAY NEAR WICKETT, TEXAS, ON
AUGUST 10, 1931.

September 22, 1931.

To the Commission:

On August 10, 1931, there was a collision between a passenger train and a section motor car on the Texas and Pacific Railway near Wickett, Texas, which resulted in the death of four employees and the injury of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Big Springs Sub-division of the Rio Grande Division, which extends between Toyah and Big Springs, Texas, a distance of 152.7 miles, this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system, the signals being of the color-light type, approach lighted. The accident occurred at a point 4,751 feet west of the station at Wickett; approaching this point from the west, the track is tangent for several miles, and for a considerable distance beyond, while the grade is undulating and is 0.4 per cent ascending for eastbound trains at the point of accident.

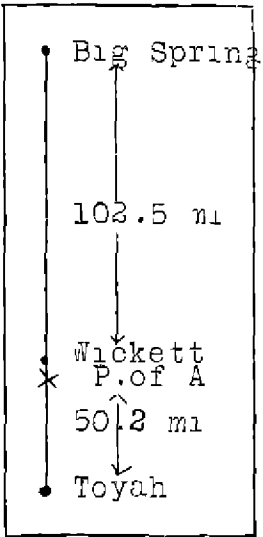
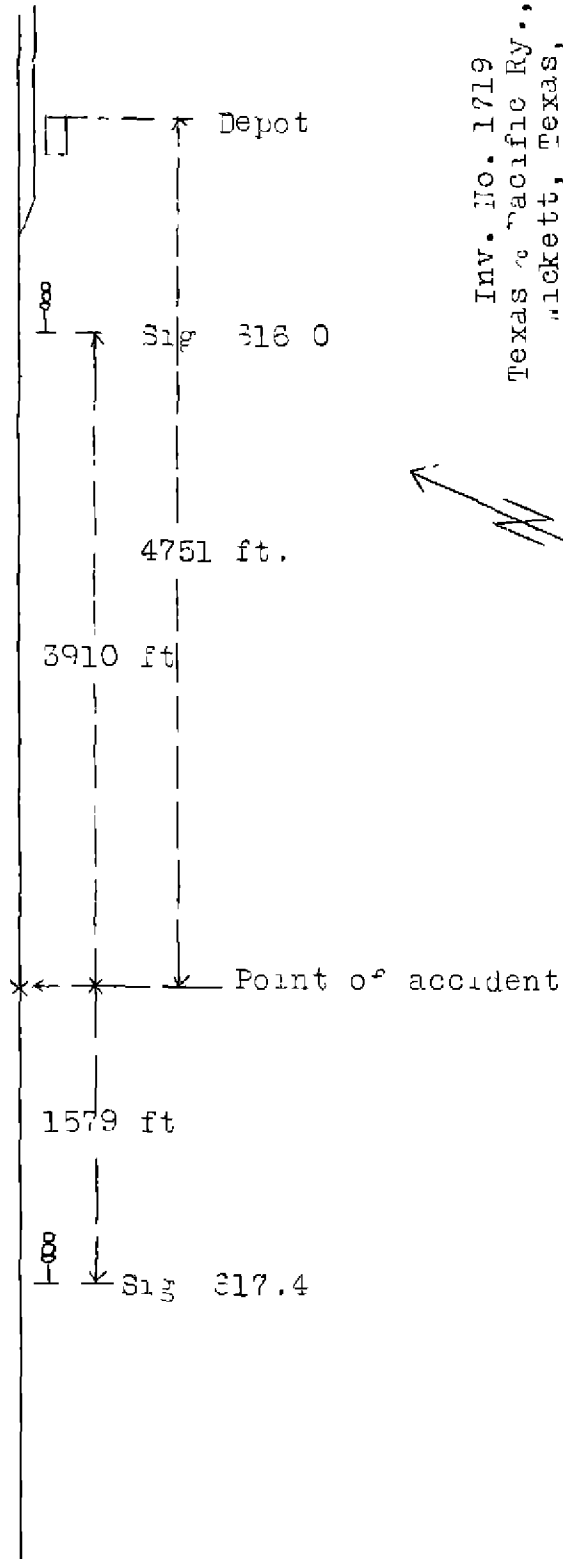
The weather was cloudy and a light mist was falling at the time of the accident, which occurred about 10.05 a.m.

Description

Eastbound passenger train second No. 16 consisted of 1 combination mail and baggage car, 1 coach, and 2 Pullman cars, hauled by engine 711, and was in charge of Conductor Shaw and Engineman Smith. This train left Toyah, 50.2 miles west of Wickett, at 9.12 a.m., 6 hours and 22 minutes late on time-table schedule, passed Pyotte, 42.2 miles beyond and the last open office, at 9.55 a.m., and was approaching Wickett when it collided with the motor car while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 40 and 45 miles per hour.

The motor car involved was a six-horsepower Fairmont insulated car, with a push car attached, and was in charge of Section Foreman Dowdy. This section outfit left the toolhouse, located east of Wickett, at 8 a.m., and pro-

Inv. No. 1719
Texas & Pacific Ry.,
Wickett, Texas,
August 10, 1931



ceeded westward, the crew performing section work en route. After arriving at the western terminus of the section, approximately 3 miles west of Wickett, a return movement was started, the push car being shoved ahead of the motor car, and it was while this movement was being made, and while the outfit was traveling at an estimated speed of 15 miles per hour that it was struck by train second No. 16.

As a result of the collision the motor car and push car were demolished and the pilot of engine 711 was broken off, none of the equipment in the train was derailed. All of the employees killed and injured were members of the section crew.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Smith stated that a terminal test of the brakes was made before leaving Toyah, that he made a running test after leaving that point, and that the brakes functioned properly in reducing speed at one point en route. After ascending a knoll west of Wickett he noticed an object on the track, about 2 miles distant, which he supposed consisted of section men working on the track. When the train reached a point about 1 mile from the obstruction the fireman remarked that he thought it was a hand car on the track, but as he had frequently approached section crews with motor or hand cars on the track, which they would remove when his train was from 200 to 300 yards distant, he did not begin reducing speed at the time. Upon reaching a point between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ mile from the object he sounded several blasts of the whistle and made a service application of the brakes, and when the train reached a point within 500 or 600 feet from the motor car, and as no attempt was being made to remove it from the track, he applied the brakes in emergency and opened the sanders, but due to the short distance and the wet condition of the rails he was unable to stop the train in time to prevent the accident. He estimated the speed of his train at the time the obstruction first came into view at 60 miles per hour, but thought this speed was reduced to about 45 miles per hour at the time of the accident. He also said that there was nothing about the engine that interfered with his vision, but that the light mist obscured the view to some extent.

Fireman Engle stated that while the visibility was rather poor on account of weather conditions, he observed a section crew, which he thought was working on the track, as soon as the train ascended the knoll west of the point of accident, which he estimated was about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile distant, but he could not determine at that time whether the track was occupied. He informed the engineman to this effect but

the engineman made no reply although he kept a sharp lookout ahead. When the train was about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the section crew he noticed that they were riding on a motor car and apparently paying no attention to the approaching train. He then notified the engineman that there was a motor car on the track and the engineman in turn applied the brakes, at the same time sounding the whistle continuously until the collision occurred. Fireman Engle did not know whether the brakes were applied in emergency, but they appeared to take proper hold, reducing the speed of the train from between 55 and 60 miles per hour to about 40 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Conductor Shaw stated that his train departed from El Paso at 3.56 a.m., and that the brakes functioned properly in making several stops en route. The engine crew was changed at Toyah and a terminal test of the brakes was made before departing, a running test being made after leaving that point, while the brakes also worked properly when they were applied to reduce speed in passing through Pecos, 21 miles east of Toyah. He was riding in the front end of the second car working on a report when approaching the point of accident and felt an application of the brakes and heard warning blasts sounded on the engine whistle. He looked out of the window but did not see anything unusual, although about 20 or 30 seconds later he saw debris flying and then knew the train had struck some object, learning later that it had struck a section motor car. He thought the train was traveling 58 or 60 miles per hour when the brakes were applied, and 35 or 40 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

The statements of Brakeman Crobtree were to the effect that nothing unusual occurred during the trip until the train was approaching Wickett, when he heard alarm whistle signals sounded and felt a light application of the brakes. He immediately leaned out of a window and looked ahead, expecting that there was stock on the track, but did not see anything until he noticed men rolling from the track, at about the same time the brakes were applied in emergency. He estimated that 30 or 40 seconds elapsed from the time the brakes were first applied and the time of the accident, and that the speed was between 55 and 60 miles per hour when they were applied and 40 or 50 miles per hour when the collision occurred.

Section Laborer Ornelas, the only surviving member of the section crew, stated that they were unable to get a lineup on trains when the outfit passed Wickett station, as there was no one on duty at the time. The crew tightened bolts at various points until they reached the western end

of the section, and then the return movement was started, the foreman having instructed them to look for loose bolts and joints en route but not saying anything about looking out for trains. They were all riding on the motor car as it started the return movement eastward, with the push car ahead of it, and were engrossed in watching the track, paying no attention to block signals, one of which was about 1,600 feet west of the point of accident and another 3,900 feet east thereof, neither did they look out for trains. The outfit was moving at a speed of about 15 miles per hour when he looked back and saw the approaching train, which was then only about 30 feet away, and he immediately jumped off. None of the section men said anything, although they all turned around and looked in the direction of the approaching train. Section Laborer Ornelas had not heard any whistle signals sounded, but said the train could have been seen for a distance of about 3 miles had some one been on the lookout.

Mr. Ellis, an employee of the Wickett Refining Company, stated that he was working in the vicinity of the point of accident at the time of its occurrence. He heard several short blasts of a train whistle some distance towards the west, and from the nature of these blasts he thought there were cattle on the track. He walked to a point where he could clearly see the track and observed a motor car just coming into view from the west; he did not see the train at that time, as there were some oil storage tanks that obstructed the view farther westward. When the train came into sight it was only about 500 feet behind the motor car and was traveling at a rapid rate of speed. The men on the motor car looked around, and he thought they had plenty of time to jump off but only one of them did so.

General Roadmaster Fuller stated that Section Foreman Dowdy had been in the service of the company for 18 or 19 years, that his regularly assigned hours were from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that the records did not indicate he had been on duty other than the regular hours during the last few days prior to the accident. He said the rules required that employees operating motor cars must keep a sharp lookout both front and rear at all times. He was not positive whether Foreman Dowdy had received a copy of this rule, although the district roadmaster informed him that he had personally tacked a copy of it, printed on large cardboard, in the toolhouse at the foreman's headquarters.

It appeared from the records that on March 3, 1930, Foreman Dowdy was examined on the rules of the transportation department, as well as on the rules governing the use of motor and hand cars on main tracks. About the middle of the same month rules governing the use of motor cars, etc., were printed on large cardboard, in bulletin form,

and placed in all toolhouses, including the toolhouse on the section where Foreman Dowdy was located at that time. On August 15 of the same year Postmaster Fuller put out a letter addressed to all section foremen, calling their attention to the rules recently issued covering the use of motor cars, and two days later another circular was issued to all foremen advising them that when they were going to use motor or hand cars on the main line it would be necessary for them first to secure a line-up from the dispatcher when necessary for the safe operation of these cars, and that they should at all times be protected against approaching trains in line with the transportation rules. The receipt of this latter circular was acknowledged by Foreman Dowdy on June 1, 1931.

On August 12 a vision test was conducted by the Commission's inspectors to determine how far the section men could have seen train No. 16 approaching, the same type of equipment as involved in the accident was used. At the time of this test, however, the sun was shining whereas the accident occurred on a cloudy and misty day. When the engine was backed away from the section car the engine could be plainly seen continuously for a distance of more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. The section men and their car could be seen from the engine as some object on the track for a distance of about 2 miles, but it could not be definitely ascertained that there was a section car on the track until the engine was only about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile distant. In making this test the engine was moved slowly, while train No. 16 was traveling at a high rate of speed as it approached the point of accident.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the operation of a motor car on the main track without protection, for which Section Foreman Dowdy was responsible.

The rules governing the use and operation of motor cars, hand cars, etc., provide that employees operating motor cars and velocipede cars must keep a sharp lookout both front and back at all times, and on hand cars the arrangement of the men shall be such that men will be facing both front and rear whenever the car is on the track and moving. From the statements of Section Laborer Ornelas, however, all of the employees on the motor car were facing eastward, in the direction the section outfit was moving, and watching the track, upon instructions from the section foreman, until just before the collision occurred, although it was possible to have seen the approaching train for a distance of approximately 3 miles. It appears that the engine crew was on the alert and saw the section crew on

the track while some distance away, but could not determine that the track was occupied, which was partly due to weather conditions, until the train reached a point only a short distance from the point of accident; every effort then was made to prevent the accident, but on account of the short distance it was impossible to do so. The evidence clearly indicated that several blasts on the engine whistle were sounded as the train approached the point of accident, but Laborer Ornelas said that he did not hear these warning signals and that his first intimation of an approaching train was when he looked back and at that time the train was only a short distance away. Foreman Dowdy was an experienced man, familiar with the rules covering the operation of motor cars, and it was his primary duty to see to it that a proper lookout was maintained.

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.