

1925

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY CONCERNING  
AN ACCIDENT ON THE VIRGINIAN RAILWAY NEAR DOTHAN,  
W. VA., ON AUGUST 12, 1934.

October 26, 1934.

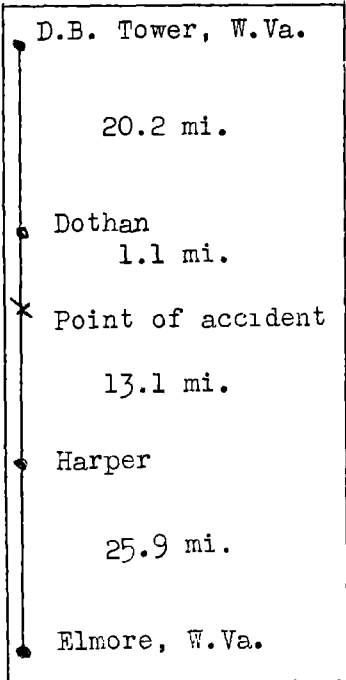
To the Commission:

On August 12, 1934, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Virginian Railway near Dothan, W. Va., which resulted in the death of 1 passenger, and the injury of 7 passengers, 1 mail clerk, 2 employees on duty, 3 employees off duty, and 3 trespassers.

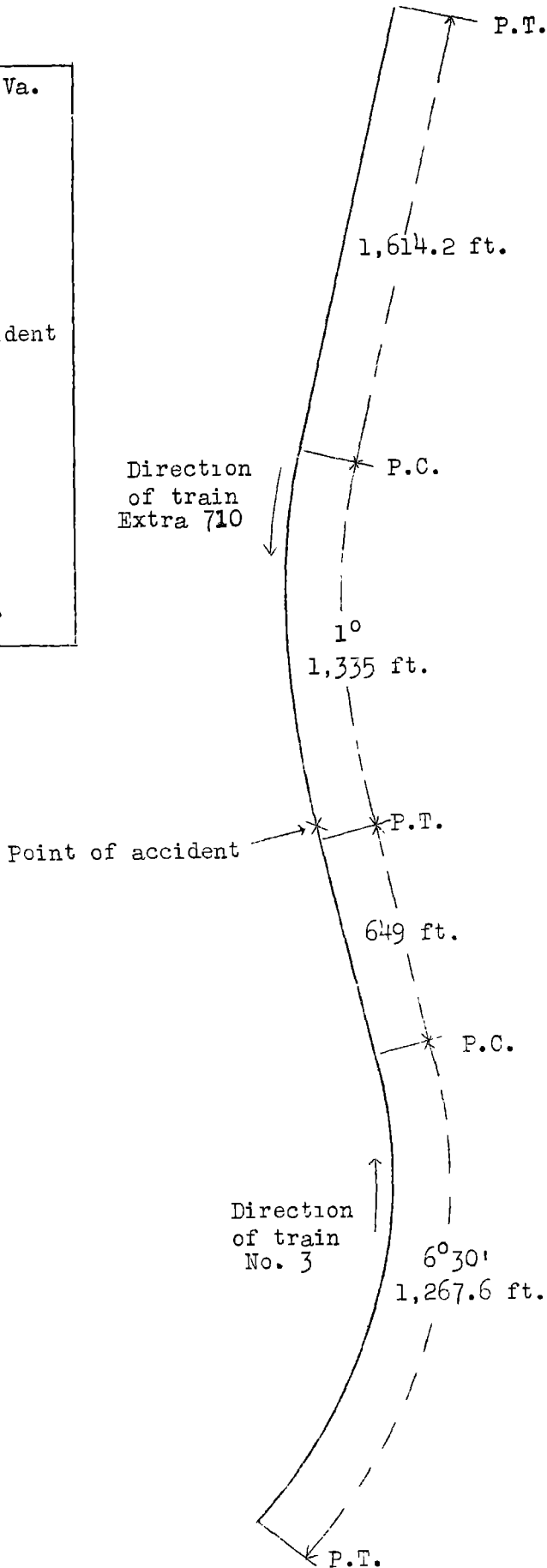
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Fourth Sub-Division of the New River Division, which extends between D.B. Tower and Elmore, W. Va., a distance of 30.3 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. Trains of the New York Central Railroad are operated over this sub-division of the Virginian Railway. The accident occurred at a point about 1.1 miles east of Dothan, referring to time-table directions; approaching this point from the west, the track is tangent for a distance of 1,614.2 feet, followed by a  $1^{\circ}$  curve to the left 1,335 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 11 feet from its eastern end. Approaching from the east there is a  $6^{\circ}30'$  curve to the left 1,267.6 feet in length and then tangent track for a distance of 649 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is generally descending for eastbound trains, being 1.06 percent at the point of accident. Owing to the curvature of the track and embankments along the right of way the view of the point of accident from the west is restricted to 1,087 feet and from the east to 760 feet.

The weather was foggy and it was dark at the time of the accident, which occurred about 8:30 p.m.



Inv. No. 1925  
 Virginian Railway  
 Dothan, W. Va.  
 August 12, 1934



### Description

West-bound passenger Train No. 3 consisted of 1 combination mail and baggage car and 2 coaches, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 210, and was in charge of Conductor Kidd and Engineman Earls. This train departed from Harper, 14.2 miles east of Dothan, at 7:58 p.m., on time, and was approaching Dothan when it collided with Extra 710 while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 12 and 20 miles per hour.

East-bound New York Central freight train Extra 710 consisted of 33 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 710, and was in charge of Conductor Casebolt and Engineman Malone. This train departed from D.B. Tower at 7 p.m., left Page, 12 miles from Dothan, at 7:55 p.m., without any orders concerning Train No. 3, and shortly after passing Dothan it collided with Train No. 3 while traveling at a speed variously estimated at from 10 to 20 miles per hour.

The front end of engine 710 overrode engine 210, and the seventh and eighth cars in the freight train were derailed and overturned. Both engines were considerably damaged, the passenger cars were slightly damaged, and the overturned cars, two other cars and the caboose of the freight train were more or less damaged. The employees on duty injured were the engineman and fireman of the passenger train and the employees off duty injured were riding on the passenger train.

### Summary of evidence

Engineman Earls, of Train No. 3, stated that the brakes were tested before departing from Roanoke, the initial terminal, and functioned satisfactorily at all points during the trip. The train encountered intermittent banks of fog after passing Long Branch, 4.9 miles east of Dothan, and it was quite dense in the immediate vicinity of the point of accident. While the train was rounding the sharp curve east of the point of accident the fireman called to him that a train was approaching and he immediately closed the throttle, applied the brakes in emergency, and then sounded the whistle, the train running a distance of approximately one and one-half times its own length before the collision occurred. He estimated the speed of his train at 25 miles per hour when he applied the brakes, and thought it had been reduced to 12 or 15 miles per hour at the time of the accident. He remained on the engine but did not see the headlight of the opposing train at any time, which he attributed to his position on the outside of the curve and the fact that he was busy in trying to stop after being warned of danger by the fireman.

Fireman Keffer, of Train No. 3, stated that he was riding on his seatbox and as soon as the train reached the tangent track after passing around the curve to the left he saw a light ahead which at first appeared through the fog to be a lantern about 12 or 15 car lengths distant, but by the time his train had moved two car lengths he recognized it as a headlight and immediately shouted a warning to the engineman, who applied the brakes in emergency. The fireman said it was impossible to have seen the headlight of the opposing train any sooner than he did on account of curvature of the track and the heavy fog.

Conductor Kidd, of Train No. 3, stated that the train was traveling at a speed of about 25 miles per hour when he heard one long blast of the whistle and felt an emergency application of the brakes. He did not look at his watch at the time, but the watch of an engineman who was deadheading on the train was broken and stopped at 8:32, indicating that the accident occurred about that time.

Engineman Malone, of Extra 710, stated that he is employed by the New York Central Railroad, was qualified to run on the Virginian Railway between D.B. Tower and Elmore in June, 1931, and had operated trains quite regularly over this territory since that time. The brakes were tested before leaving Dickinson and all were found to be operative, and he experienced no difficulty in handling the train en route. His engine was drifting on the descending grade approaching the point of accident and he had been controlling the speed by manipulating the feed valve, and he said he was engaged in watching the air gauge and manipulating the feed valve, after the engine had left a tunnel 1,489 feet from the point of accident, when the fireman shouted a warning of an approaching headlight; the engineman raised up in the window, saw the headlight, and immediately applied the brakes in emergency. The brakes appeared to function efficiently and reduced the speed from probably 20 or 25 miles per hour to not more than 10 or 12 miles per hour at the time of the accident. He said that although it was dark the weather was clear and there was nothing to interfere with the glow of the approaching headlight, but he did not see it until after the fireman shouted the warning. Engineman Malone, who had been running regularly in this territory, said he had a copy of the current Virginian time table but had not checked it and entirely overlooked Train No. 3; he was unable to account for his oversight.

Fireman G. C. Harmon, of Extra 710, stated that practically all of his experience has been on the New York Central Railroad except possibly an aggregate service of about 1 year working jointly on the New York Central and the Virginian, having run an engine occasionally on the latter line. He had a time table with him but did not look at it at any time prior to the accident, although while at Page he had discussed their running order with

the engineman, passenger trains not being mentioned, and he said that he entirely overlooked Train No. 3. When his train reached a point about 25 car lengths east of the tunnel he saw the rays of a bright light around the curve east of that point and he kept watching this reflection until the light actually came into view; he then realized that it was the headlight of an approaching train and notified the engineman and after the engineman looked ahead the latter applied the brakes in emergency. He estimated that his train was then traveling possibly 18 or 20 miles per hour when he got off, about 20 feet from the approaching train.

Conductor Casebolt, of Extra 710, stated that at Page he received a copy of an order to run extra to Gulf Junction and meet west-bound extra 728 at Page, and remarked to the flagman that if the freight train did not arrive in good time their own train probably would not get beyond Hamilton, 8.6 miles west of Dothan, for Train No. 5. After the extra train arrived at Page his own train departed and he rode in the cupola of the caboose with the head brakeman and flagman, but nothing was said concerning Train No. 3 and he did not think of that train again. His first warning of anything unusual was when the brakes were applied in emergency and when the train came to an abrupt stop he thought it had been derailed; he estimated the speed at the time of the accident at not over 20 miles per hour. Conductor Casebolt had been operating trains over the Virginian Railway only since July 2, 1934, and said he was not entirely familiar with the schedule of Train No. 3 at all points, but at no time did he refer to his time table to check the schedule of that train, which was the only scheduled train to be met.

Rear Brakeman Slack, of Extra 710, stated that after leaving Page he rode in the cupola of the caboose and discussed with the conductor and Head Brakeman J. S. Harnon the work to be performed at Long Branch, the next station where the work was to be done, 4.9 miles east of Dothan. None of these employees had looked at his time table and each of them said he had forgotten about Train No. 3.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by the crew of Extra 710 overlooking the schedule of an opposing superior train.

All of the members of the crew of Extra 710 stated that they had time tables in their possession but failed to look at them at any time prior to the accident, although the conductor thought of Train No. 3 while his own train was at Page and mentioned a possible meeting point with that train to the rear brakeman, but after departing from Page they both forgot about

the superior train, while the balance of the crew did not have it in mind at any time. The members of the crew of Extra 710 were experienced men and qualified to operate trains on the Virginian Railway, but they could not explain why they failed to ascertain definitely the time of scheduled trains in that territory.

Less than three months prior to this accident there was another head-end collision on this line near Cirtsville, a station 8.7 miles from Dothan. That accident resulted in the death of 2 employees and the injury of 1 employee, and in the report covering the investigation of that accident mention was made of several previous head-end collisions and attention was called to the fact that this railroad operates unusually heavy tonnage trains, with grades requiring helper service, and passes through a section of the country where there are many curves and cuts which materially restrict the view, and it was stated that the carrier should give consideration to the question of providing the greater safety which would be afforded by some form of block-signal system. The accident here under investigation serves to call attention again to this question and to emphasize the need for the Virginian Railway to take steps toward installing additional protection for the purpose of guarding against the occurrence of future accidents of this character.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON,

Director.