

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE ATCHISON, TOPEKA & SANTA FE RAILWAY AT DEMING, N.M., ON AUGUST 30, 1924.

September 24, 1924.

To the Commission:

On August 30, 1924, there was a rear-end collision between a yard engine and a work train on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway at Deming, N. M., resulting in the death of one employee and the injury of seven employees.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on that part of the Third District of the Rio Grande Division extending between Rincon and Deming, N. M., a distance of 55.5 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 accident occurred on the main line, within the yard limits of Deming, at a point approximately 40 feet east of the switch leading to the Southern Pacific transfer track; this is a facing-point switch for westbound trains and leads off the main track to the south. Approaching the point of accident from the east the track is tangent for more than a mile, then there is a 70° 30' curve to the right 396 feet in length, followed by a tangent of considerable length, the accident occurring on this latter tangent at a point about 125 feet from its eastern end. The grade is level. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 12.20 p. m.

Description.

Yard engine 894, headed west, in charge of Engine Foreman Wilkey and Engineman Taylor, consisted of one loaded gondola car, ahead of the engine, and two loaded gondola cars behind the engine. As work extra 1035 approached the switch leading to the Southern Pacific transfer track the yard engine backed out upon the main track, when the switch was closed and the yard engine started westward, and after moving a short distance, while traveling at a very low rate of speed, the rear car was struck by work extra 1033.

Work extra 1035 consisted of five flat cars ahead of the engine, engine 1035 headed west, and a caboose, and was in charge of Conductor Hawthorne and Engineer Davey; it held orders to work extra from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. between Deming and Nutt, this last-named station being 28 miles east of Deming. Around 8.15 a. m. this train departed from Deming and proceeded to a point about 13 miles east thereof, in order to perform work on bridge 1119-D. About 11.30 a. m. it left the bridge, en route to Deming, at which point the employees intended to eat, and on reaching a point approximately 6,150 feet west of the east yard-limit board at Deming, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 10 or 12 miles an hour, the head flat car in the train collided with the rear gondola car of yard engine 894.

The two gondola cars on the rear of yard engine 894, the yard engine and its tender, and the first two flat cars in work extra 1033, were only slightly damaged, as was engine 1035. The remaining three flat cars were derailed, the first of these coming to rest on top of and across the second car in the train, while the west end of the car ahead of the engine was partly on top of the fourth car, with its rear end against the smoke box of the engine. The employee killed was a bridge and building carpenter, who was riding on the forward end of the first car in work extra 1033.

Summary of evidence.

Yard engine 894 had been switching in the vicinity of the switch leading to the Southern Pacific transfer track just prior to the accident, the main line switch being left open. When work was completed Engine Foreman Wilkey gave the signal to back out on the main line. Although Switchman Ball said he stood at the main line switch about two minutes in all, he did not look in the direction of the work train prior to the time the yard engine backed out on the main line. Engineer Taylor had seen the work train east of the east stock yard switch, which is 2,000 feet east of the point of accident, but he did not know whether it was approaching or standing still. The cars behind the engine did not obstruct the view and while backing out on the main track he looked back several hundred feet in the direction of the work train but did not see it, and thought the way was clear. After backing out Switchman Ball closed the switch, and just after the yard engine started to move westward on the main track he saw the work train approaching a short distance away, and the brakeman on the head end of the leading flat car laying stop signals; Switchman Ball shouted a warning of danger, but the yard engine had moved forward only a short distance when the accident occurred. Engineer Taylor estimated the speed of his train to have been about 2 miles an hour at the time.

Engine Foreman Wilkey stated that before giving the signal to back out on the main track he did not observe, or instruct other members of the crew of the yard engine to ascertain, that the way was clear. Switchman Sampson did not notice the work train approaching until after the yard engine had backed out on the main track, and at this time it was about five or six pole lengths away; however, he was of the opinion that it was approaching under control and would look out for the yard engine.

Approaching Deming, Head Brakeman Weber was riding on the forward end of the leading flat car in the work train, while Conductor Hawthorne and Flagman Watson were riding in the caboose. At the east end of the yard the engine whistle was sounded and while crossing a bridge located about 1 mile east of the point of accident Engineman Davey reduced the speed to about 18 to 20 miles an hour. When about opposite the stock yards, located about 1,050 feet east of the point of accident, Brakeman Weber saw the yard engine near the transfer track, on account of the curve ahead he was not sure which track it was occupying and he said he could not tell the position of the switch, and therefore, gave a slow signal and turned around to see whether or not Engineman Davey received it, as there were a number of carpenters riding on the flat cars between where he was stationed and the engineman. In response to this signal the speed was reduced. On again looking ahead Brakeman Weber saw the yard engine back out on the main line and gave violent stop signals when about 500 feet from the point of collision; the air brakes were applied in emergency, but it was too late to avert the accident.

Engineman Davey stated that on reducing the speed at the east end of the yard he kept the air brakes applied for a distance of about 15 car lengths. When about at the stock yards he noticed that the main track was clear and the switch closed, but on receiving the slow signal, at which time the speed was about 15 or 18 miles an hour, he made about a five or six-pound brake-pipe reduction, holding the brakes applied about three or four car lengths and reducing the speed to about 12 miles an hour. Just after the brakes were released the brakeman waved violent stop signals. He immediately applied the air brakes in emergency, opened the sanders, and had started to place the engine in reverse when the accident occurred, at which time he estimated the speed to have been about 10 miles an hour; Engineman Davey did not think that the proper effect was obtained from the emergency application, owing to the previous service application, as the speed was only about 10 or 12 miles an hour at the time the emergency application of the air brakes was made and the train traveled about six or eight car lengths before the collision occurred. Engineman Davey further

stated that he thoroughly understood the rule in regard to approaching yard limits; that he is thoroughly familiar with the physical characteristics and switches in this vicinity, and that the east yard-limit board is in a conspicuous position; that the air brakes had been tested and worked properly; that there was nothing about the engine to distract his attention from keeping a proper lookout ahead, and that the brakeman was in plain view; that the position of the switch can be seen for at least a half mile from the east; that he noticed the smoke from the yard engine when he sounded the engine whistle in the vicinity of the east yard-limit board; that he was aware the yard engine usually works at Denning, that he was of the impression the crew of the yard engine saw his train approaching and would not back out on the main line directly in front of the work train, which was done when it was about 12 or 13 car lengths away, and that full air pressure was being carried when he received the slow signal and he reduced the speed merely as a precaution, not realizing there was a possibility of a collision, as there was no one standing at the switch, and therefore he did not think the yard engine would back out on the main line.

Fireman Parsons was riding on the deck of the engine just prior to the accident, he, Conductor Hawthorne and the man Watson were unaware of anything wrong until the air brakes were applied just before the accident occurred. Flagman Watson estimated the speed of the work train to have been about 35 miles an hour when passing the yard-limit board. Conductor Hawthorne stated he did not take up a position at the forward end of the leading flat car in this instance as he had implicit confidence in the ability of his crew.

The testimony of the bridge and building carpenters was to the effect that the air brakes were applied in emergency just prior to the accident, and that the speed of the work train was between 8 and 10 miles an hour when the accident occurred. Foreman Thomas stated that there were two air-brake applications made in the immediate vicinity of the point of accident.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of work extra 1035 to be operated under proper control approaching Denning, for which Engineman Daver, Conductor Hawthorne and Trainman Meyer are responsible; and the failure of the crew of yard engine 884 definitely to ascertain that the main track was clear for the movement about to be made, for which Foreman Wilkey, Engineman Taylor, and Brakeman Bell are primarily responsible.

Rule 93 of the book of rules of this railroad reads in part as follows:

"All except first class trains will approach yard limits under control. The responsibility for accident at such points will rest with the approaching trains."

The book of rules also defines "Under Control" as "Ability to stop a train within the distance track is seen to be clear."

The evidence is conflicting as to whether the main track switch was open or closed when work extra 1033 approached, before engine 894 moved out on the main track, but in view of the fact that it was daylight, with the view unobscured for a long distance, and with the curve on the engine's side, there is no reason why both Brakeman Weber and Engineman Davey should not have seen the switch if already opened, or when subsequently opened, neither is there any reason why they should not have seen engine 894 back out on the main track, in ample time to stop, provided their train was being operated under full control; the condition of the equipment after the accident, however, as well as the statements of the various employees involved, indicate that work extra 1033 was not being operated under proper control. Had the speed of the work extra been properly reduced when approaching the point where the switch engine was seen to be working, the work extra could have been brought to a stop in time to avert the accident.

The evidence also indicates that the crew of the switch engine failed to ascertain whether or not the way was clear before occupying the main track. Engineman Taylor saw the work extra when it was some distance away, and as he also was on the inside of the curve he should have seen it at the time he began to move out on the main track. Engine Foreman Wilkey apparently gave a signal to back out on the main track without having any knowledge of the fact that the work extra was closely approaching, while Switchman Ball, an inexperienced man, was standing at the main-track switch and was in position to signal to either train; instead, he did not look in the direction of the work extra until after the engine had backed out on the main track and the switch was closed, the collision occurring immediately afterwards.

All of the employees involved were experienced men, except Switchman Ball and the fireman of engine 894. At the time of the accident the crew of the work train had been on duty less than 6 hours, and the switch crew less than 1½ hours, prior to which they had been off duty more than 12 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND.

Director.