

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE ATLANTA, BIRMINGHAM & ATLANTIC RAILWAY NEAR DOUBLE RUN, GA., ON JANUARY 27, 1935.

March 18, 1935.

To the Commission

On January 27, 1935, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Atlanta, Birmingham & Atlantic Railway near Double Run, Ga., which resulted in the death of one express messenger and the injury of nine passengers, three employees and one mail clerk.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the second district of the Brunswick Division, which extends between Westwood and Manchester, Ga., a distance of 128.8 miles, this being a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at a point about 1 mile west of the station at Double Run; approaching that point from the east there is a tangent 2,705 feet in length followed by a curve of 2° to the left 970 feet in length, the accident occurring on the curve 285 feet from its western end. Approaching from the west the track is tangent for more than 1 mile to the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is level on the curve, while on either side it is slightly descending for eastbound trains. The view is restricted to about 450 feet on account of trees on the inside of the curve.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 1.40 p.m.

Description.

Westbound passenger train No. 1 consisted of one box car, one express car, one mail car and two coaches, hauled by engine 65, and was in charge of Conductor Steele and Engineman Morris. The first and third cars were of steel-underframe construction, while the others were of wooden construction. Train No. 1 left Double Run at 1.37 p.m., 21 minutes late, and shortly afterwards it collided with extra 108 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 18 miles an hour.

Eastbound freight train extra 108 consisted of 31 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 108, and was in charge of Conductor Miles and Engineman Wilson. At Cordele, Ga., the crew received a copy of train order No. 38, providing in part for extra 108 to meet westbound extra 123 at Cordele. The crew also received train order No. 41, changing this meet with extra 123 from Cordele to Double Run, together

with a copy of train order No. 42, directing train No. 1 to run 40 minutes late. Train order No. 44, annulling train order No. 43 and changing the meet with extra 123 from Double Run to Musselwhite, was also put out by the dispatcher to the crew of extra 108 at Cordele, but the conductor did not receive a copy of it and the engineman claimed not to have done so. Extra 108 met extra 123 at Musselwhite, however, passing that point without stopping, and collided with train No. 1 near Double Run while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 12 miles an hour.

Both engines were derailed and badly damaged, but remained upright. The first car in train No. 1 was derailed and the second practically demolished. The first car in the train of extra 108 was demolished, while the next three cars were derailed and considerably damaged. The express messenger killed was riding in the second car of train No. 1.

Summary of evidence.

Train order No. 38, as well as several other orders not involved in the accident, had been delivered to the crew of extra 108 at Cordele by Operator Haslan, while train orders Nos. 41, 42 and 44 were issued to Operator Douglas. Operator Douglas first delivered train orders Nos. 41 and 42 to Conductor Miles and told the conductor to add the numbers to the clearance card he had previously received. Conductor Miles delivered copies of these orders to Engineman Wilson, but neither he nor the engineman added the numbers to their respective clearance cards. Shortly afterwards train order No. 44 was issued, and Operator Douglas went to the west switch of the passing track, which is east of the station, and asked Flagman Duncan where he could find Conductor Miles. On being told that the conductor was at the east end of the passing track he said he waited until engine 108 backed out on the main track at the west switch and then boarded the engine and gave the engineman the copies of the order intended both for him and for the conductor, writing the number of the order on the engineman's clearance card and remarking that train No. 1 was now on time. Operator Douglas also said that Engineman Wilson read the order back to him and that he told the engineman to deliver a copy of the order to the conductor. Operator Douglas acknowledged his failure to deliver a copy of the order personally to the conductor as required by the rules.

Conductor Miles verified the statements of Operator Douglas as to the handling of train orders Nos. 41 and 42. Shortly after he had gone to the east end of the yard his engine passed him on the main track, after having backed out at the west passing-track switch, and he said Engineman Wilson called to him that he had an order to meet extra 123 at Musselwhite instead of at Double Run. When ready to depart from Cordele he went to the engine and asked Engineman Wilson for a copy of the order changing the meeting point and he claimed that the engineman replied "It is all in this other bunch of orders and everything is all right; let's go." Conductor Miles said he insisted on getting the order but the engineman said "they are looking for us in Fitzgerald, let's go," and Conductor Miles then left the engine without a copy of the order, accepting the word of Engineman Wilson, and being of the impression that all the order in question did was to change the meeting point with extra 123 from Double Run to Musselwhite, not knowing anything about the run-late order having been annulled. Conductor Miles told Head Brakeman Thorpe and Flagman Duncan that they would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite and returned to the caboose, where he was riding at the time the accident occurred. Conductor Miles acknowledged responsibility for his failure to obtain a copy of an order affecting the movement of his train.

Head Brakeman Thorpe said Conductor Miles told him that the meet with extra 123 had been changed from Double Run to Musselwhite, also that he was informed by Engineman Wilson that train No. 1 would run 40 minutes late, and while en route to Musselwhite Fireman Powers told him that they might head in at Musselwhite if they got there before extra 123 arrived. After passing Musselwhite he asked Engineman Wilson if they were going to Hatley, 6 4 miles beyond, for train No. 1 and he said the engineman replied that they would go to Double Run. Head Brakeman Thorpe had seen Operator Douglas get off the engine at Cordele but had not seen any of the orders.

Fireman Powers saw Operator Douglas board the engine and hand orders to the engineman, who read them aloud to the operator, but he did not pay any attention to the contents of the orders, neither did he notice the operator writing the number of the order on the engineman's clearance card. Engineman Wilson afterwards told him that they would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite and he also heard Engineman Wilson give the same information to Conductor Miles but he did not hear any conversation between them about the conductor's copy of the order.

Flacman Duncan said Conductor Miles told him train No. 1 was 40 minutes late, this being while they were engaged in switching. About the time the train was leaving Cordale the conductor told him they would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite.

Engineman Wilson, of extra 108, said some one got on the engine at Cordale with an order on Form 19 and inquired for the conductor, but this man did not give him any orders or instructions, although Engineman Wilson said he saw on the bottom of the order the words "Musselwhite instead of Double Run." He denied any knowledge of train order No. 44, or that he told Conductor Miles that they would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite instead of at Double Run, and he claimed that he asked Conductor Miles if he got the order. Engineman Wilson identified the train on the passing track at Musselwhite as extra 123 and as a reason for not stopping when he saw the train at that point he stated that when he reached Double Run he intended inquiring of the dispatcher as to how extra 123 happened to reach Musselwhite. After the accident he gave his orders to Engineman Morris, of train No. 1, to examine, and told the latter that he had 40 minutes time on train No. 1. Engineman Wilson further stated that he had reduced speed in accordance with a slow order in effect just west of the point of accident, had then released the brakes, and that the train was moving at a speed of 10 or 12 miles an hour when he saw train No. 1 about 100 or 150 yards distant.

Engineman Morris, of train No. 1, said that shortly after the occurrence of the accident Engineman Wilson came to him and asked what was the matter, saying that he had 40 minutes time on train No. 1. Engineman Morris asked to see his orders and on examining them he was unable to find a copy of train order No. 44. Engineman Morris did not remember whether or not the numbers of orders 41 and 42 were written on the clearance card but was positive that the figure "44" did not appear thereon. The clearance card was badly soiled and crumpled at the time of his examination and as he did not scrutinize it closely he was unable to say whether or not any of the numbers which might have been on it had been erased. He also stated that he cautioned Engineman Wilson to preserve the clearance card, but at the investigation, however, Engineman Wilson was unable to produce this card.

Train order No. 44, taking away rights which had been given to eastbound extra 108 against train No. 1 and also changing the meeting point with extra 123 to a station west of the original meeting point, was issued to extra 108 on Form 19, although under Rule 211, a train order written on Form 19 is not to be used to restrict the superiority of a train. The officials stated, however, that about two years previously they had decided to issue train orders on

Form 19 in practically all cases except where they restricted the rights of a first-class train, but it appeared from a statement by General Superintendent Brower that no bulletin to that effect was issued and that upon request of the superintendent of the Brunswick Division the latter had been given verbal authority to place the practice in effect.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Wilson, of extra 108, to keep his train clear of the main track on the time of train No. 1 in accordance with a train order which annulled the run-late order which had been previously issued, and by the failure of Conductor Miles, of extra 108, to obtain a copy of an order which he knew had been issued to his train.

Engineman Wilson claimed that he did not receive a copy of train order No. 44, which annulled the run-late order and also changed the meeting point of his train with extra 123 from Double Run to Musselwhite. This statement, however, is not supported by the statements of any of the other employees involved; both the conductor and fireman said Engineman Wilson told them their train would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite instead of at Double Run, and that these employees were in possession of such information was corroborated by the statements of the head brakeman that the fireman told him that they might head in on the passing track at Musselwhite if they reached there ahead of extra 123, and by the statement of the flagman that the conductor told him they would meet extra 123 at Musselwhite. In view of these statements, and the further fact that Engineman Wilson was unable to produce his copy of the clearance card, it would appear that not only did Operator Douglas board the engine as was testified to by some of the members of the crew, but that the operator actually delivered to the engineman a copy of the train order in question, and it seems probable that the engineman observed that part which changed the meeting point with extra 123 but overlooked that portion of it which annulled the run-late order of train No. 1. The presence of extra 123 on the passing track at Musselwhite should have been sufficient warning to him that something was wrong, inasmuch as the crew of extra 123 could not have been expected to proceed to Musselwhite, the second station west of Double Run and 10.9 miles distant therefrom, and then take siding for his train, unless they had train-order authority for such a movement.

Apparently none of the other members of the crew had been told anything about the run-late order having been annulled, and after passing extra 123 at Musselwhite in accordance with the order which they supposed had been issued to their train they seemed to have been under the impression that they could proceed to Double Run and take siding for train No. 1 at that point, using the 40 minutes in time provided for by the run-late order. All of them, however, according to their own statements, knew that an order had been issued changing the meeting point with extra 123, and there is no excuse for the action of Conductor Miles, in allowing his train to depart from Cordale until he had obtained a copy of the order. Had he been in possession of this order it is possible he might have read the order correctly and thus have discovered that they would have to keep clear of the schedule of train No. 1, which was 21 or 22 minutes overdue at the time the accident occurred.

Lax practices in the handling of train orders usually result in the occurrence of accidents. In this case the operator received additional train orders for a crew to which a clearance card had already been delivered without first taking up the clearance card for the purpose of entering on it the numbers of the additional orders but instead he entrusted this duty to the conductor and engineer; the operator delivered the copies of train order No. 44 to the engineer instead of to the conductor and again left to the conductor the duty of entering the number on the clearance card, the engineer apparently misread the order; the conductor knew an additional order had been issued, but allowed his train to depart without obtaining a copy of it, while the fireman, head brakeman and flagman knew nothing about the order except what had been told them. That the proper handling of train orders is of paramount importance if the operation of trains is to be conducted in safety has been pointed out so often, and has been emphasized by the occurrence of so many disastrous accidents due to lax methods of handling such orders, that further discussion on this subject is needless. It is sufficient to say that if the occurrence of accidents of this character is to be avoided the officials of this railway should take energetic measures toward enforcing strict obedience to the rules on the part of all concerned.

Had an adequate block-signal system been in use on this line this accident probably would not have occurred, an adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented it.

The crew of extra 108 had been on duty about 11 hours and the crew of train No. 1 about 5 hours, previous to which the members of both crews had been off duty about 9 hours.

Respectfully submitted,
W.P. BORLAND,
Director.