

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
CENTRAL OF GEORGIA RAILWAY NEAR COVINGTON, GA , ON
NOVEMBER, 24, 1927.

January 7, 1928.

To the Commission:

On November 24, 1927, there was a head-end collision between a freight train and a gasoline motor car on the Central of Georgia Railway near Covington, Ga., which resulted in the death of two employees and the injury of two employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Covington District of the Savannah Division which extends between Covington and Porterdales, Ga., a distance of 4.5 miles. 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 at a point nearly $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles west of Covington; approaching this point from the east the track is tangent for a distance of 917.5 feet, followed by a compound curve to the left 1,777 feet in length, the maximum curvature of which is 4° , the accident occurring on this curve at a point 1,050 feet from its eastern end where the curvature is at its minimum. Approaching from the west there is an 8° curve to the left 844 feet in length, then tangent for a distance of 543 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade at the point of accident is 0.96 per cent ascending for westbound trains. The accident occurred on a fill located a very short distance east of a cut about 15 feet in depth which materially restricted the range of vision.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 11.06 a.m.

Description

Westbound third-class freight train No. 99 consisted of three box cars, engine 209, three other freight cars and a caboose, in the order named, and was in charge of Conductor Camp and Engineman Knight. This train departed from Covington at 11 a.m., 3 hours and 20 minutes late, and shortly afterwards collided with the gasoline motor car while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 4 miles per hour.

The motor car involved, a converted Ford motor car equipped with four-wheel brakes, was in charge of Superintendent Reichert, who was operating the car at the time of the accident. This car departed from Covington, westbound, at about 10.25 a.m., without train orders, and proceeded to Porterdale, arriving there at about 10.40 a.m. After remaining at that point a few minutes it started a return movement to Covington, again without orders, and after covering a distance of approximately $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles it collided with train No. 99 while travelling at a speed estimated to have been between 25 and 45 miles per hour.

The motor car was demolished, but practically no damage was sustained by the freight train. The employees killed were the division superintendent and a roadmaster, both of whom were occupants of the motor car.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Camp, of train No. 99, stated that at about 10.20 a.m. Superintendent Reichert met him in the station at Covington and asked him at what time his train would be ready to leave that point for Porterdale. Conductor Camp replied that he would be ready to leave at 11 o'clock and he said he also informed the roadmaster to the same effect. The superintendent then informed Conductor Camp that the motor car would precede the train to Porterdale, whereupon he asked the superintendent if the train should be held at Covington until the motor car returned, to which the superintendent replied, "No, when you are ready, come on; I will be around over there somewhere looking for you." This conversation took place in the station at Covington in the presence of Agent Edens, Flagman Padgett, and Conductor Cooper, the latter being off duty at the time. Conductor Camp said his train was ready to leave Covington at 10.57 a.m. but on account of what he had told the superintendent he waited until 11 a.m. The train then departed, with Conductor Camp riding on the leading car from which point he kept a vigilant lookout thinking perhaps the motor car was then between the station and the transfer track, the last siding west of Covington. Upon reaching this transfer track, and not finding the motor car, he decided that it had remained at Porterdale and his train proceeded toward that point but had traveled only a short distance when he observed the motor car approaching, apparently moving at a high rate of speed, and he at once gave his engineman an emergency stop signal. Conductor Camp estimated the speed of his own train at the time he gave the stop signal to have been 15 miles per hour and thought it had been reduced to about 4 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

The statements of Agent Edens, Flagman Padgett and Conductor Cooper practically corroborated those of Conductor Camp as to the conversation that took place between Conductor Camp and Superintendent Reichert at Covington prior to the accident. Agent Edens stated that he asked Superintendent Reichert if he wanted orders to go to Porterdale and the superintendent replied that he did not need them, Agent Edens said that it was not customary to issue orders covering the short trip from Covington to Porterdale and return, Engineman Knight, of train No. 99, stated that he was standing outside the station at Covington when Superintendent Reichert came from the office and the superintendent informed him that the motor car would go to Porterdale ahead of his train and instructed him to proceed as soon as the train was ready, stating that the motor car would be waiting for the train somewhere. Engineman Knight further stated that his train left Covington at 11 a.m., and after proceeding a short distance he received an emergency stop signal from the conductor, the brakes were applied in emergency bringing the train to a stop within 10 car-lengths distance. Flagman Padgett, who was riding in the caboose, said the brakes were applied with sufficient force to throw him to the floor. Engineman Knight and Flagman Padgett estimated the speed to have been about 15 miles per hour at the time the brakes were applied. The statements of Fireman Key, Brakeman Smith, who was riding in the engine cab, and Brakeman Williams, who was riding on the leading car with the conductor at the time of the accident, brought out no additional facts of importance.

The statements of Agent Trapnell and Operator Morris, of Porterdale, were to the effect that Superintendent Reichert did not ask for orders while at Porterdale and that there was no mention made with regard to train No. 99. Agent Trapnell said the motor car departed from the station between 10.50 and 10.55 a.m., while Operator Morris did not note the time but thought it was nearly 11 a.m. Each of these employees was of the impression that the motor car would enter one of the various sidings at Porterdale and wait for train No. 99.

The motor car was occupied by Superintendent Reichert and Roadmaster Burch, both of whom were killed, and also by Section Foreman Simerson and the colored motor-car attendant, McLaney. Section Foreman Simerson stated that at the time the car departed from the station at Porterdale he thought it was the intention to clear the main track at the wye, which is the last clearance point at Porterdale for eastbound trains. When the motor car continued past this

point and he realized they were not going into clear for train No. 99 he mentioned the fact that the local was about due, which statement was not answered in any way by any one on the car; his remark was not addressed to any one in particular but was intended for the benefit of the superintendent. Foreman Simmerson said he did not make any further remarks about train No. 99 as he did not know what action Superintendent Reichert had taken while at Porterdale, the superintendent having been the only member of the party to enter the station at that point, and he was of the impression that the superintendent was aware of the situation. Section Foreman Simmerson also said he felt reluctant to call further attention to the matter on account of the official position held by Mr. Reichert. He first observed train No. 99 when it was about 300 or 300 feet distant, at which time the speed of the motor car was 25 or 30 miles per hour, and jumped off after calling a warning to the others on the motor car. The section foreman did not know if the speed of the motor car was reduced prior to the occurrence of the accident, and said that as he jumped off he saw the roadmaster standing on the running board, from which point he could have gotten off, but that he did not know if Superintendent Reichert made an attempt to get off. He estimated that train No. 99 was moving at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour when it first came in sight.

Motor Car Attendant McLaney stated that while at Covington he heard Superintendent Reichert instruct the crew of train No. 99 not to wait for the return of the motor car from Porterdale, stating to them that he would be looking out for the train. At the time the motor car left Porterdale, Attendant McLaney was riding directly behind Superintendent Reichert and at that time he thought the motor car would clear for train No. 99 at the coal chute and he prepared to open the switch for that purpose. When the car did not stop at that point he then decided that it would clear at the wye, but it also continued beyond this point without stopping. Realizing that train No. 99 probably was about due, he made efforts to attract the superintendent's attention to the danger by leaning over his shoulder as the motor car rounded the curves, but he made no mention of the situation as he thought the superintendent knew what he was doing and was afraid of irritating him. Attendant McLaney said when he saw the train approaching, approximately 300 feet distant, he patted the superintendent on the shoulder and called his attention to the train, also telling him to apply the brakes. Attendant McLaney did not care to estimate the speed of the motor car at the time the train was first observed, but said it was capable of running 45 miles per hour and he thought it was running at nearly full speed. He remained with the car until just before the

occurrence of the accident, and said that during that time the Superintendent made no attempt to apply the brakes. Attendant McLaney further stated that he had been working with the motor car for about 13 months and that usually it was operated under train-order authority, although at times Superintendent Reichert did not show him such orders or inform him as to their contents. He said he had never been rebuked by Superintendent Reichert for asking questions but indicated that he felt backward about calling attention to the existing situation.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of a motor car, operated without orders, to be kept clear of the main track on the time of an overdue train, for which superintendent Reichert is responsible.

The investigation developed that Superintendent Reichert had been advised that train No. 99 would leave Covington at 11 a. m., and apparently he understood the situation as he instructed the crew of that train to proceed as soon as they were ready, informing them that he would be on the lookout for the train. It further developed that Section Foreman Simmerson and Motor Car Attendant McLaney were familiar with the arrangements made at Covington, and that after the motor car departed from Porterdale on its eastbound trip they became apprehensive as to the whereabouts of train No. 99, realizing they were then about on the running time of that train providing no subsequent arrangements had been made by Superintendent Reichert while at Porterdale. They attempted, both verbally and by actions, to warn the superintendent of the existing danger but did not explicitly call his attention to the matter. The reason for Superintendent Reichert's failure to heed their warnings is not known.

The motor car was being operated without train orders at the time of the accident. The rules require that when a motor is used instead of an engine, the "requirement of the rule will be the same for a motor as for an engine." This would require that movements of motor cars over the main line be governed by train orders, or schedule. Orders had been prepared covering the movement of the motor car eastward from Covington, after its return from Porterdale, but Superintendent Reichert told the agent at Covington that he did not need train orders to go to Porterdale and he did not request orders at the latter point for the return movement to Covington. Had this movement of the motor car been governed by train orders this accident undoubtedly would not have occurred.

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 laws of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.