

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO RAILWAY AT WHITMAN JUNCTION, W. VA., ON SEPTEMBER 20, 1923.

October 31, 1923.

To the Commission:

On September 20, 1923, there was a collision on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway between a cut of runaway coal cars and a passenger train at Whitman Junction, W. Va., which resulted in the death of 2 employees, and the injury of 13 passengers and 2 employees.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the Island Creek Branch of the Logan Division, extending between Holden and Logan, W. Va., a distance of 4.2 miles, and from Whitman Junction, which is between Holden and Logan, to Mine No. 20 of the Island Creek Coal Company, a distance of 4.6 miles, which in the vicinity of the point of accident is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders. This accident occurred at the junction switch at Whitman Junction, approaching this point from the west the track is tangent for about 3110 feet, followed by a 7-degree curve to the left extending to the junction switch, a distance of about 680 feet. The grade from Mine No. 20 is 1.75 per cent descending for about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile, 1.4 per cent descending for about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, 1 per cent descending for about a mile and the remaining distance to Whitman Junction, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, varies from 1 per cent descending to level. On account of a high bank on the north side of the track the view is limited to 350 feet. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 6:35 a.m.

Description.

Westbound second-class passenger train No. 63 consisted of one baggage car and two coaches, hauled by engine 121, and was in charge of Conductor Steele and Engineman Leake. This train left Holden at 6.10 a.m., and proceeded to Whitman Junction, at that point entering on the branch line and proceeding to Whitman, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Whitman Junction; on the return movement to Whitman Junction, while backing out of the switch at that point, at a speed of about 10 or 12 miles an hour, it was struck by nine runaway cars.

On the morning of the accident at Mine No. 20 of the Island Creek Coal Company, located about 3 miles west of Whitman, three loaded steel hopper cars, blocked by a railroad tie, stood on a tipple track on the south side of the main track at a point about 500 feet from the point of the main-track switch and about 300 feet above a Hayes derailler; about 1,100 feet west of these cars stood three loaded steel hopper cars and a box car partially loaded with mine ties, blocked by two mine ties and a piece of pine block. Two loaded steel hopper cars, coupled, manned by a mine company employee on each car, were dropped down the track on which the other cars were standing, colliding with the four cars, and, getting beyond control, these six cars continued down the track, striking the other three cars, the ties with which they were blocked tore out the derailler, and the nine cars entered the main track and continued down the grade toward Whitman Junction, colliding with train No. 63 when that train was about to pass over the junction switch at Whitman Junction, while running at a high rate of speed.

The nine cars were derailed in zig-zag fashion on the roadbed but remained upright, while the engine and coaches of train No. 63 were shoved down the roadway a distance of about 450 feet. The engine was derailed and badly damaged, and the tank cistern thrown on its side on the north side of the roadbed about 200 feet east of the point of collision, the baggage car was demolished and thrown over on its side about 100 feet beyond the tank cistern, and the first coach was overturned about 100 feet beyond the baggage car, the day coach was not derailed. The employees killed were the engineer and fireman.

#### Summary of Evidence.

George Bumgardner, an employee of the coal company, said that on the day prior to the accident he rode three loaded cars down the tipple track and stopped them a short distance above the derailler, setting the brakes on the three cars securely and blocking the car nearest the derailler with a 7 x 9 railroad tie.

Night foreman Allsop of the coal company, said that he had assisted Booth, another employee, in riding a car down from the tipple, the car being brought to a stop about 500 yards above three other cars standing near the derailler at the lower end of the track, and that he saw Booth set up the brakes on the car and they seemed to work alright, and in addition two mine ties were placed across the rails of the track to serve as blocking. He also saw the next two cars dropped down the track and the hand brakes set, but did not see the fourth car when it was moved. Later

while engaged in making out his reports he heard the noise of cars striking and went outside and saw several men endeavoring to stop a cut of five or six cars on the tipple track, a man riding the last car was setting the brake and another man was running along on the ground trying to block the wheels with ties. He ran after the cars but when he saw them strike the three cars at the lower end of the track and pass over the derail, he ran back to the mine and securing his automobile endeavored to overtake the runaway cars but without success.

Ora Doctn said that at about seven o'clock on the night previous he had assisted Foreman Allison in dropping a loaded car down the tipple track and after it was brought to a stop some distance above three cars standing at the lower end of the track, he set the brakes securely and placed a mine tie across both rails next to the wheels and another tie about 3 feet in front of the wheels, and he also placed a piece of wood on the track to serve as additional blocking, although he said the ties had always held. Assisted by another employee he dropped three more cars down the track as they were loaded during the night shift, the last car being handled at about six o'clock on the morning of the accident, the brakes being set and each car coupled to the car previously handled. He said the brakes seemed to work alright on all of the cars except one, which was equipped with a patent brake, and although he did not examine it for defects he said that it did not seem to check the speed of the car like the brakes on the other cars.

C. C. Ramsey said that on the morning of the accident he rode the first of two loaded cars, which were coupled together, down the tipple track, R. Watson, another employee, riding the second car, and that the brake on the car he was riding was set and they were moving at a low rate of speed when they struck four other cars standing on the track, as the brakes did not seem to hold, and the cars started to move, he tried to set the brake tighter on the car he was riding and did succeed in setting it another notch tighter, then he got off and tried to stop the cars by blocking the wheels, at which time he noticed that some of the wheels were sliding on the rails, but the cars gained momentum and continued on down the grade, striking three other cars near the derail and entering onto the main track. R. Watson said he had set the brake on the car he was riding when the cars struck and although Ramsey got off and tried to block the wheels, he remained on the car until the cut collided with the passenger train. He estimated the speed of the cut at the time of the collision to have been about 100 miles an hour.

Car Foreman Burke said that he inspected the nine runaway cars on his arrival at the scene of the accident about 7.30 a.m., and found that the brakes and brake rigging on all of the cars were in good condition. The hand brakes on only one of the cars, the ninth or last car in the cut, was set, while the brakes on the second car were so covered by wreckage that he was unable to make a thorough inspection, there were two rounds of brake chain around the brake staff of the fourth car and the chain was slack from the staff to the brake rod.

General Foreman Mahannes and Boilermaker Foreman Hankey said they made an inspection of the runaway cars when they arrived at the scene of the accident about 10:30 a.m., one of the cars, the last car in the cut, had been removed, but on the remaining eight cars they found the brakes and brake rigging to be in good condition, except on the first car, which had come in contact with the engine, the brakes were set on only two of the other seven cars, which they indicated as the second and fourth cars from the head end.

Conductor Steele, of train No. 63, said that leaving Holden he did not have a full crew, but when he called on the telephone for a clearance and train orders he did not report the fact to the dispatcher. He said the fireman handled the switch at Whitman Junction and the switch was left lined for the branch while the train moved to Whitman. On the return movement he was riding on the rear platform of the day coach and while backing out of the switch at a speed which he estimated to have been about 10 or 12 miles an hour, he said he felt two severe impacts from the head end, at which time the train was about two coach lengths past the junction switch, he had had no warning of danger.

#### Conclusions.

This accident was caused by the failure of employees of the coal company properly to apply hand brakes on loaded coal cars on a heavy descending grade.

While the statements of the railroad employees as to the number of hand brakes found set after the accident did not agree with those of the coal company employees as to the number which were set prior to its occurrence, it is clearly evident either that the last two cars to be moved down the tipple track were allowed to attain too high a rate of speed, or that the hand brakes on the cars standing at the lower end of the tipple track were not set sufficiently tight to prevent them from running away when other loaded cars were coupled to them.

All of the employees of the railroad 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.