INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE CHICAGO, INDIANAPOLIS & LOUISVILLE RAILWAY NEAR ST. JOHN, IND., ON MAY 25, 1928.

July 24, 1928.

To the Commission:

On May 25, 1928, a passenger train on the Chicago, Indianapolis & Louisville Railway struck an automobile trailer near St. John, Ind., and was derailed, resulting in the death of two employees. This accident was investigated in conjunction with a representative of the Public Service Commission of Indiana.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the First District of the Northern Division, extending between Shops, Ind., and Chicago, Ill., a distance of 118.2 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders and an automatic block-signal and automatic train-control system. The accident occurred at a point about $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles north of the station at St. John, at the point where a public highway known as Old Joliet Road crosses the main track at an angle of about 45°. The railroad track at this point extends from northwest to southeast while the public highway, a gravel road 18 feet in width, extends from north to south.

Approaching the crossing from the south on the railroad there is a 0° 30' curve to the left 1,533 feet in length and then the track is tangent for a distance of 657 feet to the crossing and for a considerable distance beyond; the grade for northbound trains is 0.49 per cent descending. Approaching from the north on the highway, beginning at a point 100 feet north of the crossing, the road rises 7 feet to the level of the crossing, is level over the track and then it descends 4 feet within a distance of 35 feet, a sharp decline of 2 feet being made in the first 10 feet of this descent. The crossing is

planked between the rails and there is one plank on the outside of each rail. The only protection afforded at the crossing is the ordinary railroad crossing warning signs, one of these being located on each side of the crossing.

The weather was foggy at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 5.53 a.m.

Description

The vehicle involved in this accident, owned by the Downey Construction Co., Hammond, Ind., consisted of a Mack 5-ton truck with a trailer attached, which was equipped with an underslung body. The truck was being operated by William Bathurst and was proceeding south on Old Joliet Road. It passed over the crossing and on starting down the south approach the body of the trailer scraped on the west rail and an angle iron caught in the rail, stalling the truck. This occurred at about 5.50 a.m., and about three minutes later the trailer was struck by train No. 36.

Northbound passenger train No. 36 consisted of one mail car, two express cars, one combination car, one coach and five Pullman sleeping cars, in the order named, hauled by engine 432, and was in charge of Conductor Smith and Engineman Belanger. This train passed St. John at 5.50 a.m., according to the train sheet, two minutes late, and was traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 40 to 45 miles per hour when it struck the trailer at Old Joliet Road.

The trailer was thrown clear, and to the west, of the track, 120 feet beyond the crossing. Engine 432, its tender, the first four cars and the forward truck of the fifth car were derailed. The engine came to rest east of and parallel to the track, with its head end 248 feet beyond the crossing; the engine and first two cars were overturned, while the other derailed cars remained practically upright. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman.

Summary of evidence

Statements of surviving members of the crew were to the effect that the first they knew of anything wrong was when the air brakes were applied in emergency just prior to the accident, at which time the speed of their train was about 40 or 45 miles per hour. They also said that the air brakes had worked properly en route.

The driver of the automobile truck involved in this accident, William Bathurst, age 46 years, stated that the truck departed from Hammond at about 4.30 a.m., proceeded to Thornton, at which point the trailer was attached, and from that point was en route to Cedar Lake, in order to load a concrete mixer on the trailer. The driver said that before proceeding upon the crossing he looked to ascertain that there was no train approaching, and that he then drove the truck upon the crossing at a speed of not more than 2½ miles per hour. When the front wheels of the trailer passed over the crossing the body of the trailer scraped the west rail and an angle iron caught thereon, leaving the front wheels of the trailer suspended in the air. An attempt was made immediately to release the trailer with a crow bar, and the angle iron was pried up and blocked. Preparations were then made to place blocks under the front wheels of the trailer, in order for them to have something to run upon, when the rumble of the train was heard and the headlight noticed. The truck driver and his helper Aaron Smith, ran toward the approaching train, waving stop signals, the driver with his cap and the helper with gloves, and the driver stated that two short blasts of the whistle were sounded just about the time the engine came into view. Prior to this time no attempt at flag protection had been made. It also appeared from the truck driver's statements that on one other occasion, while proceeding over a crossing in Hammond, the underframe of the trailer dragged on the crossing but that it did not cause the truck to stall. The statements of the helper, Aaron Smith, corroborated in substance those of the driver; the helper also said that the truck was brought to a stop before proceeding over the crossing, also that he had run a distance of about five or six telegraph pole lengths toward the approaching train before it came into view around the curve. The statements of four eye-witnesses to the accident were similar in substance to those of the truck driver and the helper as to what transpired just prior to the accident.

The trailer involved weighed about 4½ tons; it had an underslung body about 16½ feet in length and 13 feet 9 inches in width, and a steel frame with a bed of 3½ inch planks, supported on two wheels in front and four wheels at the rear. The body of the trailer had a road clearance of only 8 inches.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by a trailer attached to an automobile truck becoming stalled on a railroad crossing.

The investigation disclosed that the trailer had a clearance of only 8 inches, while the south approach to the highway crossing had a decline southward of 2 feet in the first 10 feet. As the front end of the trailer moved over the crossing, the combination of the low clearance of the body of the trailer and the sharp decline of the south approach resulted in an angle iron under the body of the trailer becoming caught in the west rail of the track, stalling the truck, and causing the front wheels of the trailer to be suspended above the road; the accident occurred before the trailer could be released.

All of 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 hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.