

*Safety*  
COMMISSIONER *Aitchison*  
CIRCULATED *3/15/19*

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IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE  
CHICAGO, MILWAUKEE & ST. PAUL RAILROAD NEAR  
ST. MARIES, IDAHO, ON FEBRUARY 1, 1919.

March 12, 1919.

On February 1, 1919, there was a derailment of a freight train on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad near St. Maries, Idaho, which resulted in the death of 2 employees. After investigation of this accident the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

Eastbound freight train No. 64, en route from Malden, Wash. to Avery, Idaho, consisted of 45 cars and a caboose, hauled by locomotive No. 8501, and was in charge of Conductor Bassenger and Engineman Irwin. It left St. Maries at 9.50 p.m. and at about 10.05 p.m. was derailed at a switch leading to a spur known as Herricks Spur, located about 1-1/2 miles from St. Maries. The speed at the time of derailment was estimated to have been about 15 miles an hour. The engine left the track at a point about 20 feet east of the switch point and ran on the ties a distance of about 145 feet before turning over on its right side. The first five cars were derailed, the first three being overturned. The employees killed were the engineman and head brakeman.

This part of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad is a single-track line and trains are operated by time table and train orders, their movements being protected by an automatic block signal system. Approaching the point

of accident from the west, there is 2057 feet of tangent track, followed by a curve to the left of 3 degrees. The switch leading to the spur is located on this curve at a point 1068 feet east of its western end and is a facing point switch for eastbound trains. The spur is on the right side of the track, traveling east, and slopes downward until it is about 18 inches lower than the main track. The switch is on a fill of about 15 feet and is about 30 feet beyond the exit of a cut 400 feet long with walls 25 feet high. A light on the switch stand, which is on the right side of the track, can be seen from the engineman's side of the engine a distance of about 250 feet. The track is practically level, laid with 85-pound rails, with 20 ties under each rail, and tie plated. Examination showed it to be in good alignment, surface and gauge. The weather was clear.

Careful examination of the derailed engine failed to disclose anything which could have contributed to the derailment. Examination of the switch showed that a piece of chain about 1/2 inch in diameter and 21 inches long was wedged between the switch point and the main rail, the switch point being open about 1-1/2 inches. Just outside the right hand rail there was found another piece of chain 45 inches long, on which there were marks indicating that it had been cut from the piece wedged in the track at the switch point by wheels passing over it. This chain had the appearance of having been dragged a considerable distance.

Further investigation of this feature developed that westbound freight train No. 91, which passed Herricks Spur about 2 hours previous to the accident, arrived at St. Maries at 8.05 p.m. and car inspectors found that a piece of binding chain about 7 feet in length had been broken from C&NWP logging flat car No. 68483. The two pieces of chain found at the spur switch were a part of this binding chain. These chains are 21 feet in length and are often found dragging along the track, as after the logs are unloaded the chains are thrown loosely on the deck of the car. Between the time train No. 91 passed and the time of the accident, two other westbound trains passed over the track, passenger train No. 17 arriving at St. Maries at 9.35 p.m. and extra 6622 arriving at St. Maries at 9.50 p.m. The crew of train No. 17 encountered a stop indication at westbound signal 41.9, located about 9100 feet east of the spur. The flagman was sent on ahead and walked the track until he had nearly reached the spur at which time he was overtaken by his train and got on the engine, riding from there to St. Maries. Extra 6622 followed train No. 17 closely and for that reason did not send a flagman ahead. These crews also found eastbound signals 43.9 and 44.6 in the stop position. They did not notice anything wrong with the switch in passing over it. Train No. 64 was the first eastbound train to pass.

Between St. Maries and the point of accident, there are two eastbound automatic signals, No. 44.6 located at the

eastern end of the eastbound passing track at St. Maries, and No. 43.8 located 1470 feet west of Herricks Spur. Both of these signals displayed stop indications when train No. 64 left St. Maries. Under these circumstances, Rule No. 509-A of the standard code of train rules, block signal and interlocking rules should have been applied. This rule reads as follows:

509-A. When a train is stopped by a stop and Proceed-Signal, it may proceed:

(a) On single track, when preceded by a flagman, to the next signal displaying a Proceed indication or until such Proceed indication is in plain view and the track ahead is seen to be clear, or when authorized by the train dispatcher, and at slow speed, expecting to find a broken rail, obstruction, or switch not properly set.

Engineman Irwin, however, had in his possession a message reading as follows:

O&N #64                                  Spokane, Feb. 1, 1919.  
St. Maries.

You may disregard danger signals St. Maries to  
Omega aout. out of order.

PLH                                  9.45 P.M.

Omega is the next station beyond St. Maries, a distance of 5.5 miles. In view of the message above quoted, the train proceeded from St. Maries, no attention being paid to the position of the signals or to the requirements of Rule 509-A.

Dispatcher Curran, on duty at the time of the accident, stated that the operator at St. Maries reported the arrival of train No. 17, the crew having flagged through the blocks on account of the signals being at danger. Shortly

afterwards the operator said the conductor of train No. 64 wanted to know if they should flag through the blocks, and he told the operator over the telephone to give the following message to the conductor, "Disregard automatic signals, Rule 509-A," the word "disregard" meaning that the crew should not flag through the block but should run slowly watching for obstructions as required by the rule. Dispatcher Curran said that it was customary to give messages to disregard block signal indications. At a subsequent investigation, he stated that there was no regular method of keeping a record of these messages. When shown a book known as a block book, which is a record of signal performances, he was asked if he included in this book a record of instructions issued to trains about disregarding automatic signals. He replied in the negative. There was an entry in this book reading, "No. 64 instructed to run block, Rule 509-A." He said that this was simply a memorandum and was put in the book by him on the morning after the accident. He had no verbatim copy of the message sent to the operator, but stated that the message did not include the words "out of order" as these words are never used.

Operator McVey stated that trains Nos. 17 and 64 reported the signals at danger and that a message was given to the conductor of train No. 64 to disregard the red boards between St. Maries and Omega on account of their being out of order. He said this was practically the exact wording

of the message. The message was not repeated back to the dispatcher and he made only one copy of it, which was given to the conductor. He stated positively that nothing was said to him by the dispatcher about including in the message anything about proceeding as per Rule 509-A.

Fireman Ivanhoff of train No. 64 stated that the speed was about 12 miles an hour at the time of derailment. He said the engineman shut off steam, but he did not know whether or not he applied the air brakes. He was not sure as to whether or not the switch light was burning, but was positive that the target indicated clear.

Conductor Bassenger of train No. 64 stated that after the arrival of train No. 17 and extra 6622 he asked the operator to get a message from the dispatcher regarding the blocks, and he received a message to disregard the signals between St. Maries and Omega, which message he gave to the engineman. He stated that the usual message would have been to disregard the signals and proceed as per Rule 509-A. In this particular case, however, he knew nothing of the condition of the signals or the nature of the trouble, and not knowing what information the dispatcher might have, he thought that there was no particular reason why the dispatcher could not have issued a message of that kind if he so desired. Under the message as received, he did not think it was necessary to run at low speed, and he stated that the speed was about 15 or 16 miles an hour at the time of derailment. He

did not feel any application of the air brakes.

Chief Dispatcher Hays stated that in issuing messages about disregarding block signals and proceeding as per Rule 509-A, it was the intention to convey the information to train crews that there were no trains in the block, but that they were to run slowly, looking for obstructions of some kind on the track. His understanding of the message as received by the crew of train No. 64 was that the train should have proceeded under control as per Rule No. 509-A, looking for obstructions, and he did not think any train should make schedule speed under a message of that kind.

Car Inspector Fleischauer testified to finding the chain wedged between the switch point and the stock rail, and also to finding the second piece of chain outside the right-hand rail. The switch point was open and the chain wedged between it and the main rail had been cut off flush with the top of the rail. Car Foreman Litwin stated that Car Inspector Fleischauer turned the pieces of chain over to him. The pieces of chain had the appearance of having been dragged for some distance, and the marks on them indicated that the chain had been cut in two by cars passing over it. A signal maintainer and section foreman testified to passing the switch at different times during the afternoon, at which times it was in working order.

Read Master Gallagher stated that when he arrived at the scene of accident shortly after its occurrence he

examined the track and found indications that the engine went off at the switch point and followed along the high rail of the curve. After passing over the frog, the engine began to tip to the right on account of the spur track being lower than the main track, finally turning over on its right side. He examined the switch and found it was being held open about 1-1/2 inches by the piece of chain previously referred to, no part of the chain extending above the ball of the rail. He measured the gauge of the track and found it to be 4 feet, 8-3/4 inches.

This accident was caused by an open switch, due to a piece of chain wedged between the switch point and the stock rail holding the switch point open about 1-1/2 inches. The opening of the switch point held the automatic block signals at danger, and the failure of the crew of train No. 64 properly to observe the rules applicable in such a case is due to their having been given a message from the dispatcher to disregard danger signals from St. Maries to Omega on account of their being out of order. The dispatcher claims the message as given by him to the operator was to disregard the blocks between the two stations as per Rule 509-A, while the operator claims no mention was made of that rule. The responsibility rests between the dispatcher and operator, and in view of their positive statements and also of the fact that no written record is kept of messages of this character, the responsibility can not be definitely fixed. It is plainly evi-



dent, however, that Dispatcher Curran is open to censure if he sent the message worded as claimed by him, i.e., "Disregard automatic blocks, rule 509-A," although in sending a message worded in this manner he was only following the custom in vogue. It is bad practice to use the word "disregard" in connection with automatic signals at any time. A better and safer practice would be to send a message worded "Proceed as per Rule 509-A."

Dispatcher Curran was made a dispatcher in June, 1912. The record shows that he was censured and suspended on several occasions. In October, 1915, Superintendent Sawyer stated that he did not consider Curran to be a safe man to work in the capacity of train dispatcher and ordered that he be dismissed from the service. Instead, he was given 60 days actual suspension.

Operator McVey had been employed at various points practically all of the time since February, 1912, chiefly in the capacity of operator, and he had a clear record. Engineman Irwin was employed as a fireman in 1910 and made his first trip as an engineman in February, 1918. Conductor Bassenger was employed as a brakeman in 1909 and promoted to conductor in 1910.

None of the employees involved in this accident had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the Hours of Service Law.

G.V.L.