INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE CHICAGO, ROCK ISLAND & PACIFIC RAILWAY AT PRATT, KANS., ON JANUARY 26, 1923

March 3, 1923.

To the Commission:

On January 26, 1923, there was a side collision between a light engine and a switch engine on the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway at Pratt, Kansas, resulting in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation.

At Pratt there is a train yard, approximately 4,000 feet in length, composed of numerous tracks. At a point 1,350 feet west of the west end of this yard the west lead track joins with the roundhouse track. The accident occurred in the yard at Pratt, at the switch extending from the lead track to the west end of yard track 4; this is a facing-point switch for eastbound movements. Approaching this point from the west, beginning at the junction of the lead track with the roundhouse track, the lead track is practically tangent to the west end of the yard, followed by an 11-degree curve to the right 110 feet in length, then 400 feet of tangent to the point of accident. The grade is practically level The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 10:10 P.M.

Description.

Light engine 2029, headed west, in charge of Engineman Lee, departed from the roundhouse at about 9:55 P.M., made a back-up movement over the west lead track, for the purpose of coupling to a westbound freight train standing on yard track 2, and on reaching the switch frog of the switch leading to yard track 4, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 4 miles an hour, the tender was struck on the right side, about 2 feet from the gangway, by switch engine 1817.

Switch engine 1817, headed east, in charge of Engine Foreman Blalock and Engineman F. Detwiler, was hauling nine cars from yard track 4, out on the lead track, and while travelling at a speed estimated to have been between 5 and 8

miles an hour, the right rear corner of the tender collided with light engine 2029.

The tender of engine 2029 was merely scraped, but the engine cab was crushed upward and toward the boiler head breaking the steam pipe connections to the right injector, also two studs that held the right rear running board bracket to the boiler. The tender of engine 1817 was turned over on its left side. The employee killed was the engineman of engine 2029.

Summary of evidence.

Prior to heading in on yard track 4, it had been necessary to bring switch engine 1817 to a stop on the main line, as the left boiler check valve did not seat properly, the escaping steam interfering with vision, and at that time Fireman R. M. Detwiler experienced considerable trouble in seating this valve. On returning to the yard the switch engine backed up to the west lead track from the east and headed in at the west end of yard track 4, Switchman Sullivan remaining at the switch and lining it for the lead track. After switch engine 1817 coupled to the cars, Engine Foreman Blalock gave a back-up signal and when about 10 or 15 feet from the point of accident, travelling at a speed of about 6 or 8 miles an hour, Engineman F. Detwiler saw light engine 2029 and applied the air brakes, the accident occurring immediately afterwards. Engineman F. Detwiler stated he was thoroughly familiar with all details of yard operation. While backing out of yard track 4 both headlights were burning properly, and he was looking in the direction of the lead track; although his vision extended only in a straight line to the lead track, owing to the square-end construction of the tender, this being a road engine equipped for switching service, and also owing to the manner in which the coal supply was carried, he did not know or endeavor to ascertain whether or not the fireman was keeping a proper lookout while moving toward the lead track, as he did not consider this necessary, nor did he notice the switchstand, although he said he probably could have seen it. He did not see Switchman Sullivan at the switch, did not know for which track this switch was lined, and, but for the accident, would undoubtedly have run through the switch. Engineman F. Detwiler further stated that although he could not see across the boiler, he heard the fireman working to seat the boiler check valve while backing out of the yard track, just before the accident occurred.

Fireman R. M. Detwiler stated that when about half way to the lead track, he left the cab and went out on the running board to seat the left boiler check valve, as the escaping steam obscured his vision, he had just returned to the cab when he heard the engineman call a warning. He said that although there were cars standing on the west end of yard track 5, had he been looking he could have seen light engine 2029 at least as far as this track, and would have seen the deck light on the light engine in time to have had the switch engine brought to a stop before fouling the lead track. He further stated trouble had been experienced with the check valve for the past 10 days. Engineman Foreman Blalock stated about 4 or 5 minutes after coupling to the cars, he gave the engineman a back-up signal. Shortly afterwards he saw a red light on the tender of light engine 2029, at which time he was riding on the east car of the cut, and got off just before the accident occurred. While moving toward the lead track he saw nothing of Switchman Sullivan, although no difficulty should have been experienced in seeing him had he stationed himself properly and displayed his lantern. Immediately after the accident he examined the switch and found it lined for the lead track, with the switch light burning properly.

Switchman Sullivan stated when switch engine 1817 headed in at the west end of yard track 4, he told the engineman he would stay at the switch. He lined the switch for the lead track, and when light engine 2029 came around the curve at the west end of the yard tracks, he looked down yard track 4 and saw switch engine 1817 backing toward the lead track. Therefore, he gave light engine 2029 an easy signal, and switch engine 1817 a stop signal, from his position between yard tracks 4 and 5, but nearer track 5, and just south of the lead track. He thought the switch engine was going to be brought to a stop before fouling the lead track, but at about that time the accident occurred.

Brakeman McClain was riding on the right side of the tender of light engine 2029 while backing down the lead track and the first intimation he had of anything wrong was when he saw the switch engine, at which time his engine was about at the switch points of yard track 4. He immediately gave violent stop signals to Engineman Lee, and jumped just before the accident occurred. The first time Brakeman McClain saw Switchman Sullivan was after the accident occurred, and at this time he was south of the lead track. Brakeman McClain further stated that it would have been difficult for the fireman of the switch engine to have seen the light engine

approaching owing to the box cars standing on the west end of yard track 5. Fireman Henderson stated that although he maintained a close watch ahead, at no time prior to the accident did he see Switchman Sullivan; his first knowledge of anything wrong was when the accident occurred.

Night Yard Master Elder stated that from his observation, Switchman Sullivan was not in the habit of remaining at switches when making moves such as switch engine 1817 made on this occasion. He further stated that Engineman F. Detwiler should have gotten the proper signal from Switchman Sullivan before attempting to back out upon the lead track.

Engineman Hodges, a regularly assigned switch engineman, stated he had experienced more or less trouble with the left boiler check valve on engine 1817 during the two weeks prior to the accident, and had reported this condition. Examination of the engine inspection reports for the 10 days prior to the accident showed that the left boiler check valve on engine 1817 had been reported defective on numerous occasions, and the reports were signed to show that repairs had been made accordingly; after the accident, however, a new check valve was applied.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by failure to ascertain that the switch was properly lined and the track clear for the movement about to be made, for which Engineman F. Detwiler is primarily responsible.

Not knowing whether or not the track was clear and the switch properly set, Engineman F. Detwiler should have brought switch engine 1817 to a stop before fouling the lead track.

Had Fireman R. M. Detwiler been keeping watch ahead as his engine approached the lead-track switch, he would no doubt have seen that the switch was not in proper position for his train and have discovered the approaching engine in time to averted the accident.

The weight of evidence indicates that Switchman Sullivan was not stationed at the switch, and he is open to severe censure for his failure to be in position to safeguard the movement of his engine. Had he been where he said he was any

signal he gave could have been clearly seen by the members of either of the crews involved, and this accident would undoubtedly have been prevented.

The employees involved were experienced men. At the time of the accident the crew of switch engine 1817 had been on duty less than 6½ hours, previous to which they had been off duty 16 hours or more, the crew of engine 3029 had been on duty only a few minutes, after nearly 21 hours off duty.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND

Director