

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE CHICAGO, SOUTH SHORE AND SOUTH BEND RAILROAD AT PARSONS, ILL., ON JANUARY 1, 1928

March 13, 1928.

To the Commission:

On January 1, 1928, there was a rear-end collision between two passenger trains on the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad at Parsons, Ill., resulting in the death of 1 employee and the injury of 48 passengers. This accident was investigated in conjunction with a representative of the Commerce Commission of Illinois.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the railroad extending between Chicago, Ill., and Gary, Ind., a distance of 30.8 miles, in the immediate vicinity of the point of accident this is a double-track electric line, over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. Under a time-table rule, trains moving in the same direction are required to keep at least three minutes apart, except in closing up at stations. The accident occurred about 900 feet east of 130th Street, near the station at Parsons, a suburb of Chicago; approaching this point from the west the track is tangent for more than 1 mile, followed by a 3° curve to the left about 1,900 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 1,600 feet from its western end. The grade is level. Except for a line of poles on the inside of the curve, the view approaching Parsons is unobstructed for a distance of about 3,000 feet, although from that distance it can not be definitely determined upon which track a train is standing. KD telegraph office, of the Michigan Central Railroad, is located just south of the tracks of the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad and about 100 feet east of the western end of the curve on which the accident occurred.

The weather was clear and cold at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 3.05 p.m.

Description

Eastbound first-class passenger train No. 17 consisted of motor 13 and trailer 203, both of steel construction, and was in charge of Conductor Farquhar and Motorman Powers. It left Randolph Street, Chicago, at 2 p.m., on time, but after proceeding a short distance it was delayed by motor trouble and assistance was requested, the trouble cleared up before assistance arrived, however, and the train proceeded. It left Kensington, 2.2 miles from Parsons, at 3 p.m., 37 minutes late, was flagged in the immediate vicinity of KD telegraph office, and then moved ahead and was brought to a stop a short distance behind train No. 71, the motor of which had become disabled while standing at the station at Parsons.

Eastbound second-class passenger train No. 73 consisted of motors 10, 14 and 102, all of steel construction, and was in charge of Conductor Ritchie and Motorman Stafford; motors 10 and 14 had been sent out for the purpose of assisting trains Nos. 71 and 17. Train No. 73 departed from Kensington at 3.02 p.m., eight minutes late and only two minutes behind train No. 17, passed the flagman of that train, and collided with the rear end of train No. 17 while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 15 and 50 miles per hour.

Train No. 17 was driven ahead and into the rear of train No. 71, the rear end of the trailer of train No. 17 coming to rest about 275 feet in advance of where it was standing when the accident occurred, separated from the head end of train No. 73 by a distance of approximately 150 feet. The last pair of wheels of the rear truck of the trailer in train No. 17 were the only wheels to be derailed. Motor 10 in train No. 73 had its front vestibule demolished and the motor caught fire, this train was moved back to Kensington, in an endeavor to have the fire extinguished, but all of the motor was consumed with the exception of its steel framework. Many of the seats in the first two trains were torn loose, the rear vestibule of the trailer was demolished and the cars were otherwise damaged. The employee killed was the motorman of train No. 73.

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Summary of evidence

Conductor Guyer, of train No. 71, said he had relieved Collector Clough of the duty of flagging, on account of the extreme cold, and Collector Clough then went to KD telegraph office to get warm. When train No. 17 approached, Conductor Guyer flagged it from a point near the western end of the curve, the train slowed down and Conductor Guyer and Collector Clough boarded it and rode on it until it was brought to a stop a few feet behind train No. 71. It was the intention to have train No. 17 couple to the rear of train No. 71 but before this could be done Conductor Guyer heard the motorman of train No. 73 sound the whistle, apparently for the crossing at 130th Street. Conductor Guyer then walked across the track and saw train No. 73 when it came within sight, moving at a speed of about 45 or 50 miles per hour. Realizing that a collision was imminent, he shouted a warning of danger, the accident occurring shortly afterwards, at which time the speed of train No. 73 was about 40 miles per hour. Conductor Guyer further stated that when he gave the warning of danger he saw Collector Payne, of train No. 17, who had gone back to flag, about a pole length east of 130th Street, but he did not hear the motorman of train No. 73 answer the flagging signals of Collector Payne, and he was not able to say whether the air brakes on train No. 73 were applied. Conductor Guyer estimated that train No. 17 had only been standing a minute or so when the accident occurred.

Collector Clough, of train No. 71, stated that when train No. 17 was flagged by Conductor Guyer he went out of KD telegraph office and boarded the rear end of the first car, and that Collector Payne, of train No. 17, got off about half-way between 130th Street and Parsons, while train No. 17 was in motion, and started back to flag. Collector Clough did not hear the motorman of train No. 73 sound any whistle signal when it approached, being in between trains Nos. 71 and 17 preparatory to coupling them together.

Motorman Powers, of train No. 17 said that his train was proceeding at a speed of about 45 or 50 miles per hour when it was flagged in the vicinity of KD telegraph office and that he slowed down and picked up Conductor Guyer and Collector Clough, of train No. 71, and continued around the curve at a speed of between 10 and 15 miles per hour. On reaching a point about three pole lengths from the rear of train No. 71, while train No. 17 was still in motion,

Motorman Powers whistled out a flag and then brought train No. 17 to a stop about 5 feet behind train No. 71. Motorman Powers then got down on the ground and started ahead to find Motorman Frye, but had proceeded only about half the distance between the motormen's compartments of the two trains when he heard Conductor Guyer shout a warning of danger. Motorman Powers turned around and saw train No. 73 coming around the curve at a speed of about 40 miles per hour, close to 130th Street, at which time Collector Payne was giving stop signals from a point just east of 130th Street. He thought the accident occurred not more than one and one-half minutes after train No. 17 had been brought to a stop. Motorman Powers further stated that the air brakes on his train had been tested at the Randolph Street terminal and that he could not complain as to the way in which they operated on this trip any more than that ice and snow on the brake shoes did not permit the taking of any extra chances. Motorman Powers also said that he could not tell whether the air brakes were applied on train No. 73 prior to the accident, he did not hear any squeaking of the brakes at that time, but he could see that the speed of the train had been checked to some extent, estimating it to have been about 15 miles per hour at the time of the accident. After the accident Motorman Powers went back as far as 130th Street, looking at the rails, but he said that there was no indication of the wheels having been sliding.

Conductor Farquhar, of train No. 17, thought his train left Kensington at 2.57 p.m., and said that when nearing Parsons a flag was whistled out and Collector Payne dropped off and started back to flag before his train came to a stop. Just after the train stopped Conductor Guyer, of train No. 71, shouted a warning of danger and Conductor Farquhar, who then was standing on the station platform, looked back and saw Collector Payne going back as rapidly as possible, while train No. 73 had about reached the western end of the curve, traveling at a speed of about 50 miles per hour; Collector Payne was then just east of 130th Street, giving stop signals with his flag. Conductor Farquhar heard train No. 73 whistle for the street crossing but did not hear the stop signals answered, and said that he did not think there was any great reduction in the speed of train No. 73 prior to the occurrence of the accident, about one minute after his own train had come to a stop.

It further appeared from Conductor Farquhar's statements that while at Kensington he was informed that train No. 71 was disabled at Parsons, he gave this information to Motorman Powers but said he did not inform Collector Payne because he was not positive train No. 71 would be found at Parsons.

Collector Payne, of train No. 17, knew that train No. 73 was following his own train closely, having flagged it at Kensington. After his train departed from Kensington, he took up two tickets from passengers who had gotten on at that point and he said he then went back to the rear end and opened the door and trap, and placed his flagging equipment consisting of flag, fusee and torpedoes, on the floor. The train reduced speed when approaching Parsons and on looking ahead Collector Payne noticed that the flagman of some other train was being picked up by his own train. The speed then was increased, but shortly afterwards, while train No. 17 was traveling at a speed of between 10 and 15 miles per hour, he heard the motorman sound the whistle signal calling for flag protection and he at once got off and started back towards train No. 73. Collector Payne said that his own train proceeded three pole-lengths from where he got off and that he had gone back about two additional pole-lengths, the poles being spaced 100 feet apart on the curve, when he saw train No. 73. He continued running towards train No. 73 until it was close to him and then stepped off the track, on the motorman's side, continuing to give stop signals from a point just east of 130th Street crossing and about 750 feet from the rear of his own train. Collector Payne said that he saw a part of Motorman Stafford's head through that part of the window from which the frost had been cleaned off, a space about 4 x 6 inches in size, and that the motorman was looking toward the south. Collector Payne said that as train No. 73 crossed 130th Street the motorman turned around and saw him, and he thought the motorman looked as if he were frightened. When train No. 73 passed him, at a speed of about 45 miles per hour, there was no indication that the air brakes had been applied.

Conductor Ritchie, of train No. 73, stated that just as his train was about to leave Randolph Street as a one-car train he was notified that two more motormen were to be coupled to the train, due to the fact that train No. 17 was disabled at 12th Street and train No. 71 was disabled at Kensington; the two extra motormen were to be used to assist these trains provided they did not become operative

before train No. 73 reached them. Conductor Ritchie said that he notified Motorman Stafford as to the situation. Approaching 12th Street, Conductor Ritchie saw train No. 17 pulling out and he therefore went forward to the motorman's compartment and called Motorman Stafford's attention to the fact that train No. 17 was going and in conversation with the motorman it was agreed that train No. 17 probably would shove train No. 71 into clear. After departing from Kensington at about 3.03 p.m. the train proceeded at the normal speed, about 40 or 45 miles per hour, he heard the whistle sounded for 130th Street and the first intimation he had of anything wrong was when he felt a service application of the air-brakes as the train approached Parsons. His train then was about at 130th Street, and on looking out on the left side of the car in which he was riding, he saw a train standing on the curve but could not definitely determine whether it was train No. 17 or a train standing on the westbound track; the accident occurred about 10 seconds after the air brakes had been applied, at which time the speed was about 40 miles per hour. Conductor Ritchie further stated that the brakes on train No. 73 were tested at Randolph Street and that all station stops down to and including Kensington were made perfectly, and as far as he knew the air brakes functioned properly. It also appeared from his statements that when he was in the motorman's compartment at Kensington he noticed that the windows were covered with frost and that a small space had been cleared of frost in order to enable the motorman to see ahead. The statements of Collector Miller, of train No. 73, brought out nothing additional of importance.

Operator Ward, of the Michigan Central Railroad, on duty at KD telegraph office, stated that when Conductor Guyer was picked up by train No. 17, Collector Payne looked out from the rear end of that train but that the collector did not get off and go back to flag until train No. 17 had stopped in back of train No. 71. The collector then started back to flag, and Operator Ward said that he went back between three and four pole-lengths and gave stop signals to the motorman of train No. 73, which signals the operator said were acknowledged. Apparently the brakes were applied at the same time, but the speed of train No. 73 appeared to have been reduced only to a slight extent prior to the accident, and Operator Ward expressed the opinion that the wheels were sliding.

Engineer of Car Equipment Otis stated that the air-brake equipment on the motor cars is connected to the master-controller handle by means of a pilot air valve in such a way that should the operator's hand be removed from the master-controller handle, the handle will automatically go to the raised position, causing the power to be shut off and the air brakes to be applied in emergency.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Conductor Farquhar and Collector Payne, of train No. 17, to afford proper protection to the rear end of their train, and by the failure of Motorman Stafford, of train No. 73, to maintain a proper watch of the track ahead of his train.

Both Conductor Farquhar and Collector Payne knew that train No. 73 was behind their train at Kensington, and in view of the fact that no block-signal system was in use in the vicinity of the point of accident and that following movements were required under the rules to be spaced only three minutes apart, it was obviously necessary that Collector Payne leave his train and go back as quickly as he could in order to provide such protection as was possible under the existing operating conditions. Collector Payne, however, did not get off when the train reduced speed for the purpose of picking up the flagman of the preceding train, but according to his own statement he remained on the train until it had nearly reached the point at which the accident afterwards occurred, at which time a whistle signal was sounded for him to protect the train and he then got off and started back to flag. In view of the high rates of speed at which these trains are operated, the close headway permitted, the fact that he knew train No. 73 was immediately behind his train, and the weather conditions existing which resulted in windows being covered with frost so as to interfere materially with the view, it was incumbent on Collector Payne to exercise unusual diligence in order to provide protection for his train. Had he gotten off when his train reduced speed for the purpose of picking up the flagman of the train ahead, he could have gone back far enough to have provided ample flag protection. The Michigan Central operator, however, said that Collector Payne did not get off until his train had come to a stop at the point where the accident occurred, if this actually was the case then the failure of Collector Payne to use due diligence was even more pronounced. Conductor Farquhar knew that his train was apt to be delayed at Parsons, and he also knew that Collector Payne had not had a great deal of experience; these circumstances should have prompted him to be particularly careful about warning Collector Payne to get off at the point where the flagman of the preceding train was picked up. He was primarily responsible for the protection of his train and under all the circumstances it is believed he is equally at fault with Collector Payne.

No definite reason could be ascertained for the failure of Motorman Stafford to bring his train to a stop in time to prevent the accident. All the evidence indicated that the air brakes on the train were in good working order, while the view around the curve was such that he could have seen the two trains ahead for a distance of about 2,000 feet, although he could not then have determined on which track those trains were standing. On the other hand, however, the evidence indicated that the windows on the ends of the cars were covered with frost, interfering with the view, and that Motorman Stafford apparently had had to clear away this frost from a small space on his window so as to enable him to have a view of the track ahead of his train. To what extent this condition prevented him from seeing the flagman of train No. 17, or the rear end of the train itself, is a matter of conjecture, but the fact remains that if he found his view was materially obscured he should have reduced speed accordingly. In either event, it seems clear that he did not realize that there was danger of an accident until within a comparatively short distance of the rear end of train No. 17, and it was then too late to avert the accident.

Had an adequate block-signal system been in use on this line, this accident probably would not have occurred, an adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented it.

None of the employees involved had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law, the motorman and conductor of train No. 73 had been on duty but 51 minutes after having been off duty more than 17 hours. Collector Payne was employed on July 1, 1927, while all of the other employees involved had been in the service for periods ranging from 1 year and 7 months to more than 19 years.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.