

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE CHICAGO, ST. PAUL, MINNEAPOLIS AND OMAHA
RAILWAY NEAR SIBLEY, IA , ON NOVEMBER 30, 1929

February 25, 1930

To the Commission

On November 30, 1929, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway near Sibley, Iowa, which resulted in the death of two employees and the injury of four employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on Sub-division 2 of the Western Division, which extends between St. James, Minn., and Sioux City, Ia., a distance of 147.7 miles, and in the vicinity of the point of accident is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. Compass directions are practically north and south, but time-table directions are east and west, and these latter directions are those used in this report. The accident occurred 4,475 feet east of the east passing-track switch at Sibley, approaching this point from the west, the track is tangent for a distance of more than 8,000 feet, followed by a 2° curve to the right, which is about 2,250 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 950 feet from its western end. Approaching from the east there is a long tangent, followed by about 925 feet of 1° curve to the right, about 875 feet of tangent, and then the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is generally descending for westbound trains, with a maximum of 1 per cent; it is 0.3 per cent at the point of accident.

There is a passing track east of the station at Sibley; this passing track is located on the south side of the main track, is about 2,100 feet in length, and its west switch is about 900 feet east of the block signal, which is located at the station. The engineer of an eastbound train leaving Sibley has an unobstructed view to a point approximately 2,000 feet beyond the point of accident, but the view of a westbound engineer is restricted very materially on account of hills and the curvature of the track.

It was snowing at the time of the accident, which occurred about 8:20 p.m.

Description

Westbound second-class freight train No 19 consisted of 27 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 432. At Worthington, 17.6 miles east of Sibley, the crew in charge of this train received copies of two train orders on Form 19. These orders were as follows:

No. 165 "No 20 wait at Ritter until seven fifty-five 7.55 PM Ashton eight five 8.05 PM Sibley eight fifteen 8:15 PM for Extra 231 West Bigelow eight thirty five 8.35 PM Org eight forty five 8.45 PM for No. 19.

No 167 "No. 19 meet Extra 101 and 301 coupled east at Bigelow and No. 20 at Sibley. Order at Sibley for No. 20 No. 19 hold main line at Bigelow."

Bigelow and Org, the stations at which train No. 20 was to wait for train No 19, are both located east of Sibley. Train No. 19 departed from Worthington at 7.35 p.m., 2 hours and 30 minutes late, and when passing Org, the last open office, the crew received a caution card calling attention, among other things, to the meets with extra 101-301, and train No 20, as provided for in train orders Nos 165 and 167. Train No 19 passed Org, which is 13.8 miles from Sibley, at 7.46 p.m., and was approaching Sibley when it collided with train No. 20 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 20 to 30 miles per hour.

Eastbound second-class freight train No. 20 consisted of 43 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 433, and was in charge of Conductor Haugen and Engineman Bridwell. At Alton, which is 32.3 miles from Sibley, the crew received a copy of train order No. 165, quoted above, and when passing Sheldon, 16.2 miles from Sibley, they received a caution card calling attention to the requirements of train order No 165. Train No. 20 passed Sibley, an open office, at 8.17 p.m., without receiving a copy of train order No. 167, and collided with train No. 19 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 15 to 25 miles per hour.

Both engines remained upright, although each of them was very badly damaged. The first three cars in train No. 19 were derailed, one of them being demolished, while six cars in train No. 20 were derailed and more or less badly damaged. The employees killed were the engineman and head brakeman of train No. 19; the employees injured were the fireman of train No. 19 and the engineman, fireman and head brakeman of train No. 20.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Albrecht, of train No. 19, said that after meeting extra 101-301 at Bigelow, which is a closed station 8 2 miles from Sibley, his train proceeded towards Sibley, moving at a speed not in excess of 35 miles per hour at any point. The fireman rode on his seat box throughout this distance, with the head brakeman behind him, and was looking through the front window of the cab. Fireman Albrecht noticed a reflection, which subsequently disappeared from his view, and at the time he thought it might be from train No. 20 waiting for them at the east passing-track switch at Sibley. He said nothing about it to the engineer, but shortly afterwards he saw the headlight of train No. 20, apparently not more than six car-lengths distant, and he at once called a warning to the engineer and jumped from the cab window. He estimated the speed of his train at that time to have been about 25 miles per hour, and said the engineer at once applied the air brakes in emergency, but that he did not think there was time enough for the brakes to reduce the speed of the train to any extent. Fireman Albrecht further stated that the headlight on his own engine was burning brightly, as was also the case with the headlight on the engine of train No. 20.

The statements of Conductor Hart and Flagman Bertelson, of train No. 19, both of whom were riding in the caboose, brought out nothing additional of importance. The conductor thought the speed of his train was between 20 and 25 miles per hour, and the flagman thought it was between 25 and 30 miles per hour.

Engineer Bridwell, of train No. 20, said that when passing the station at Sibley, moving at a speed of about 15 miles per hour, a caution card was received, calling attention to extra 101-301 ahead of them, and also calling attention to the meet with train No. 19, "as per time table, or as per train order No. _____". It is to be noted in this connection that the number of the train order was not shown on this caution card. The speed of the train then was increased to about 25 miles per hour, and finally Engineer Bridwell saw the reflection of the headlight of train No. 19. At first he thought it was an automobile, not remembering at the time that there was no highway in the immediate vicinity, and he estimated that he watched it for a period of from 50 to 70 seconds before finally realizing that it was an approaching train. By this time the two trains were not more than seven or eight car-lengths apart, and he said that he at once applied the brakes in emergency, called to the fireman and head brakeman to get off, and then jumped off himself. Engineer Bridwell further stated that with the train orders already in his possession which, as previously stated, directed his train to wait at Bigelow and at Org for train No. 19, both of these stations being east of Sibley, there was no doubt in his

mind as to his authority to proceed under the caution card. The statements of Fireman Bloom and Head Brakeman Johnson, of train No. 20, did not develop anything additional of importance.

Conductor Haugen and Flagman Roberts, of train No. 20, were riding in the caboose. Conductor Haugen said the speed of his train when passing Sibley was 10 or 15 miles per hour, and he did not think this rate of speed had been increased at the time of the accident. Copy of the caution card was handed on by hoop as the caboose passed the station, and Conductor Haugen said it was his idea that that part of the order relating to meeting train No. 19 had reference to the requirements of train order No. 165, that his train wait for train No. 19 at certain points east of Sibley. Conductor Haugen estimated that his train did not move more than six or seven car-lengths after the emergency application was made at the time of the accident. The statements of Flagman Roberts developed nothing additional of importance.

Signalman Weenick, on duty at Sibley, said train order No. 167, addressed to extra 101-301 coupled, and to train No. 20, at Sibley, and providing in part for a meet between trains Nos. 20 and 19 at Sibley, was received from the dispatcher and the "X" response given. The dispatcher had indicated that six copies of the order were to be made, but not having a 6-copy set up ready, he used one of nine copies. Signalman Weenick thoroughly understood that copies of this order were to be delivered both to the crew of extra 101-301 and to the crew of train No. 20, and he made delivery of the copies of the order to the crew of the double-header, arranged for the block to the next open office, and the train departed, at 7:39 p.m. The remaining copies of train order No. 167 were left on the table beside his typewriter, covered with a sheet of carbon paper. Signalman Weenick then filled out a caution card for train No. 20 and when filling out the last portion of the card, which related to trains Nos. 20 and 19 meeting or passing as per time-table or train order, he had in mind the wait order, No. 165, and forgot that he had a meet order put out for train No. 20 at his own station on Form 31. A few minutes before the arrival of train No. 20, he was able to see the reflection of its headlight, and asked for and received from the dispatcher a number for the caution card he had already filled out. Signalman Weenick then went out and delivered copies of the caution card by hoop to the engineer and also to the conductor, returned to the office, received payment for a telegram from a man who was in the office, and then reported to the dispatcher the departure of train No. 20, and it did not occur to him that he had forgotten to deliver train order No. 167 until the dispatcher asked him about the order. He then found the copies of the order wedged between the typewriter and the telegraph

table. Signalman Weenick further stated that a caution card may be issued by a signalman without permission from the dispatcher to a train having orders to meet at an intermediate or closed station, but a card issued to a train following another train into a block must not be issued until permission has been granted and an order number given by the dispatcher. The dispatcher gives the card a number, specifies the train to which it is issued, gives his "O K ", and the signalman furnishes the balance of the information, and in this particular case, Signalman Weenick had been previously advised by the dispatcher about the wait order which had been issued to train No. 20 at a previous station. It further appears from Signalman Weenick's statements that the information shown on the caution card is not repeated, and the dispatcher has no knowledge of what information it contains. The numbers of train orders are supposed to be shown on the caution card in the space provided for that purpose, but in some cases Signalman Weenick would comply with these instructions, while in other cases he would not do so, and on the caution card delivered to train No. 20 in this particular case he did not show the number of train order 165, which required train No. 20 to wait at certain points and which he supposed was the only restricting order in effect as far as that train was concerned. Signalman Weenick also said that there were no abnormal conditions existing at the time, except that he had a dull headache and had been quite busy with a car of stock which had been delivered by the Rock Island, and had also delivered two messages to the crew of a train at his station. He was familiar with the instructions requiring a signalman to keep undelivered orders on top of the caution and release cards, which in turn were required to be kept on top of the block sheet, the idea being to prevent a signalman from filling out a card without first seeing the undelivered orders, and said that in this case he failed to comply with these instructions.

Dispatcher Fahey said it was not customary to issue a number for a caution card before obtaining the signature of the conductor to train orders addressed to the particular train involved, but in this case the dispatcher departed from the usual custom and gave the signalman a caution card number before train No. 20 arrived at Sibley, because of the fact that both of the trains involved were important and there would be a time-saving element in so doing,-- the only time to be saved, however, would have been the time it would take the signalman to fill out the card after the order had been made complete. Dispatcher Fahey did not think that his action had created a situation whereby train No. 20 might pass without receiving the order, saying that he had the "X" response of the signalman, and that if the signalman had not failed in his duty the train could not have been cleared until the signature of the conductor had been

obtained and the order made complete. It further appears from the statements of the dispatcher that signalmen are not required to repeat the information or the train order numbers shown on the caution cards, with the result that there is no way of checking up on what orders are delivered. It was the opinion of the dispatcher, however, that the crew of train No. 20 should have stopped their train in order to have the number of the order filled in on the space provided for that purpose on the caution card.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Signalman Weenick, on duty at Sibley, to deliver a meet order.

The evidence indicates that an order to wait for train No. 19 had been put out to train No. 20 at a preceding station, effective at Bigelow and Org, points east of Sibley. Subsequently, train order No. 167 was addressed to train No. 20 at Sibley, providing in part for a meet with train No. 19 at Sibley. Signalman Weenick delivered copies of the order to a train immediately ahead of train No. 20, but in some way overlooked the fact that the order was also addressed to train No. 20, and was of the opinion that the only order restricting that train's rights was the wait order previously issued. When train No. 20 came along, therefore, Signalman Weenick gave the crew a caution card calling attention to the preceding train, which was still in the block, and also providing that they were to meet train No. 19 as per train order, having in mind the provisions of the wait order. The crew of train No. 20 naturally supposed that the caution card referred to the wait order, and the result was that their train continued eastward toward Bigelow where they supposed they were to wait for train No. 19 until 8.35 p. m. Neither engine crew became definitely aware of the opposing train until too late to avert the accident. The statements of Signalman Weenick did not indicate any definite reason for his forgetfulness other than the fact that when taking the address of train order No. 167, at the time it was issued to him by the dispatcher, he in some way failed to make a mental note of the fact that the order was addressed to train No. 20, as well as to extra 101-301.

Dispatcher Fahey said it was a practice not to give a number for a caution card until all orders to the train in question had been signed for. He did not follow this practice in this case, however, deviating therefrom simply for the purpose of trying to save the few seconds in time which would be needed by the operator in filling out the card after the train had arrived. It also appeared that the signalman failed to show on the caution card the numbers of the train orders which restricted the rights of train No. 20, although under the circumstances as they

existed in this case, it is probable that this made no great difference, for if the signalman had inserted what he thought was the proper number, he would have shown only the number of the wait order and would have omitted the number of the meet order.

Examination was made of 691 caution cards, gathered from different stations, and it appeared that 7 per cent failed to show the numbers of the orders in the space provided for that purpose. It is also to be noted that both of the caution cards issued by Signalman Weenick, to extra 101-301 coupled and to train No. 20, failed to show this information, and in each case the crew of the train involved accepted such a caution card as sufficient authority to enter the block. These are small matters, but it occurs only too often that if some matter of comparatively small importance is handled correctly, the opportunity for the occurrence of an accident is materially decreased, and in this particular case, if the dispatcher had followed the usual practice and refrained from giving a number to the caution card until the order outstanding at Sibley had been signed for, the accident could have been prevented. It would also appear that an added factor of safety in all cases could be provided for very easily by having signalmen repeat to the dispatcher the numbers of the orders to be delivered, at the time they obtain the caution card.

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