

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
CLINCHFIELD RAILROAD AT THERMAL, N. C., ON MARCH 24,
1929.

July 30, 1929

To the Commission

On March 24, 1929, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the Clinchfield Railroad at Thermal, N.C., resulting in the injury of three employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of this railroad extending between Erwin, Tenn., and Spartanburg, S. C., a distance of 141 miles, in the immediate vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, during the day a manual block-signal system is in effect, no operators being on duty at night. The accident occurred on the passing track at Thermal, at a point approximately 231 feet north of the south switch; the passing track parallels the main track on the west. Approaching the switch from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 1,904 feet, followed by a 2° 40' curve to the left 1,111 feet in length, the switch being located on this curve at a point 503 feet from its southern end. The grade at the point of accident is level.

The switch stand and targets are located on the east side of the track while the switch throw is on the opposite side of the track, the switch stand is 16 feet 4 inches in height and the targets are mounted on top of the stand, the targets being 7 feet 3 inches from the main track. A white disk, 36 inches in diameter, is displayed when the switch is closed, and a red arrow, 50 inches long and 30 inches high, when the switch is open. The switch stand is not equipped with a switch lamp. There is a telephone booth located on the east side of the track, about 20 feet south of the switch.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 1.40 a m

Description

Southbound third-class freight train No. 26 consisted of 65 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 734, and was in charge of Conductor Taylor and Engineman Fox. At Marion, 14.1 miles north of Thermal, a copy of train order No. 33 was received, directing train No. 26 to meet train No. 95 at Thermal. On arrival at Thermal train No. 26 headed in on the passing track and was brought to a stop in the clear near the south switch, and about 35 minutes later, while standing at this point with the switch open, it was struck by train No. 95.

Northbound second-class train No. 95 consisted of 29 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 414, and was in charge of Conductor Goodin and Engineman Shaffer. At Spartanburg, 44.7 miles south of Thermal, the crew received copy of train order No. 33, previously mentioned, and on arrival at Thermal train No. 95 entered the open switch and collided with train No. 26 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 30 miles per hour.

Engine 734 was driven backwards a distance of about 50 feet and considerably damaged, but remained on the rails, three cars in train No. 26 were badly damaged, one being buckled, another crushed and the third car telescoped. Engine 414 rode upon the front end of engine 734, the first car in train No. 95 was demolished and the next two cars derailed and overturned, while the fourth car came to a stop on the rails and against the tender. Two other cars back in this train were also damaged.

Summary of evidence

Head Brakeman Peake, of train No. 26, stated that after his train headed in and came to a stop in the clear on the passing track at Thermal he walked over to the telephone booth and called up the dispatcher, as is required by time-table rule when the train to be met has not arrived. About 10 minutes later he unlocked and opened the south switch, walked across to the opposite side of the track, sat down in the immediate vicinity of the telephone booth and lighted a cigarette. When the headlight of train No. 95 came into view around the curve south of the tangent, Head Brakeman Peake gave a proceed signal with his lantern, he was not positive whether this signal was answered. When the

train came off the curve and on to the tangent the whistle was sounded calling for a signal and he therefore gave another proceed signal, which signal was acknowledged by the whistle. Head Brakeman Peake said that he did not realize that there was anything wrong until about the time the engine passed him and the air brakes were applied in emergency. He attributed his mistake to the fact that usually on southbound trips the southbound train holds the main track and after telephoning the dispatcher it is customary to open the switch. In this instance when he left the engine he had not come to the realization that his train was on the passing track and the only thought in his mind was to call up the dispatcher and open the switch, which he did, and at the time he gave the proceed signals to train No 95 as it approached he was fully aware that the switch was open and that that train would enter the passing track.

Engineman Fox, of train No 26, stated that after he brought his train to a stop at the south end of the passing track he watched Head Brakeman Peake from the engine cab, he saw the head brakeman enter the telephone booth and watched the booth at intervals, but did not see him come out nor did he see him open the switch. When the engineman heard train No 95 approaching he turned off the headlight, he then saw the reflection from the headlight of the approaching engine, heard the whistle sounded in response to the signal from the head brakeman, heard it sounded again calling for a signal and again in answer thereto. Engineman Fox then crossed to the opposite side of the cab to watch the train go by and just afterwards the collision occurred. Fireman Humphreys did not notice the head brakeman open the switch, nor did he observe that the switch was open until after the accident, saying that he was operating the stoker and building up the fire when the accident occurred.

Conductor Taylor and Flagman Britt, of train No 26, were in the caboose at the time of the accident and were unaware of anything wrong prior to its occurrence.

Engineman Shaffer, of train No. 95, stated that while rounding the curve south of the tangent, when about one-half mile south of the switch, traveling at a speed of about 30 miles per hour, he received a proceed signal given from the immediate vicinity of the switch and answered it, he continued to receive such signals and called for a signal again, received several more, and answered them. Engineman Shaffer could not see the

indication displayed by the switch target, but on reaching a point about six car-lengths south of the switch the fireman shouted a warning of danger and at about the same time the engineman saw that the switch was open. He immediately shut off steam and applied the air brakes in emergency, but the collision occurred before the speed had been materially reduced. The statements of Fireman Ellis, Conductor Goodin, Head Brakeman Bartles and Flagman Goforth developed nothing additional of importance.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch, for which Head Brakeman Peake, of train No. 26, is responsible.

The evidence clearly showed that after train No. 26 had pulled into clear on the siding at Thermal the head brakeman called the dispatcher, as required when a train to be met has not arrived, and then opened the switch. According to his statement, southbound trains usually hold the main track and he forgot that in this case his own train was occupying the siding, and opened the switch for the express purpose of heading train No. 95 in on the siding, not realizing his mistake until too late to avert the accident. The investigation did not develop any reason for his error other than his statement that southbound trains usually hold the main track.

Had the particular switch stand involved been equipped with a switch lamp the accident probably would not have occurred. It might be well to mention, however, that this line is a series of short tangents and curves, and most of the passing tracks are located on curves where the view of a switch target is limited to a short distance, the passing track involved in this accident being practically the only one where it is possible to obtain a view for a distance of any consequence.

Head Brakeman Peake entered the service of this railroad in August, 1918; his record was good. At the time of the accident he had been on duty 9 hours, the same as the rest of the crew, prior to which he had been off several days. None of the other employees involved had been on duty contrary to any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,
Director