

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY
IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH
OCCURRED ON THE ERIE RAILROAD AT BLACK ROCK,
N. Y., ON FEBRUARY 25, 1928.

March 30, 1928.

To the Commission:

On February 25, 1928, there was a collision between a freight train and a cut of standing cars on the Erie Railroad at Black Rock, N.Y., resulting in the death of one employee and the injury of one employee. This accident was investigated in conjunction with a representative of the Public Service Commission of New York.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the International Branch of the Buffalo Division, which extends between International Junction and Black Rock, N.Y., a distance of 4.3 miles, and over which no scheduled trains are operated. This is a double-track line over which trains are operated under yard-limit rules, no block-signal system being in use. The point of accident was on the westbound main track at a point about 1,100 feet west of Delaware Avenue; approaching this point from the east the track is tangent for a distance of 8,502 feet, followed by a 3° curve to the left 1,907.2 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 710 feet from its eastern end. The grade is undulating, being 0.9 per cent descending for westbound trains at the point of accident. The speed limit for freight trains is restricted to 20 miles per hour on the International Branch, and to 35 miles per hour on that part of the Niagara Falls Branch extending between East Buffalo and International Junction. The yard limits extend from East Buffalo to Black Rock, N.Y., a distance of 9.3 miles.

The view of the point of accident across the inside of the curve from the fireman's side of the cab of a westbound engine was restricted to approximately 1,000 feet.

The weather was clear and it was daylight at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 5.58 p.m.

Description

Westbound freight train extra 2443 consisted of 67 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 2443, and was in charge of Conductor Lowery and Engineman Hundshamer. On the arrival of this train at Black Rock, at about 5.05 p.m., the engine and caboose were cut off and the cars were left standing on the westbound main track, as was the usual practice. After the cars had been standing at this point about 53 minutes the east end of the cut of cars was struck by extra 1697.

Westbound freight train extra 1697 consisted of 12 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1697, and was in charge of Conductor Childs and Engineman O'Neil. This train left East Buffalo at 5.45 p.m., passed International Junction, 5 miles beyond, at 5.53 p.m., and on reaching a point approximately 2.1 miles beyond International Junction the train collided with the cut of cars standing on the main track while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 35 miles per hour.

Engine 1697, together with its tender, was derailed to the north, the engine coming to rest in an upright position on top of one of the flat cars standing on an adjoining track. The first two cars in extra 1697 were derailed but came to rest in an upright position and in line with the track. The first four cars on the east end of the cut of cars were also derailed, three of these cars being demolished. The employee killed was the engineman of extra 1697.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Gerlick, of extra 1697, stated that he was putting in a fire when leaving International Junction, and that Engineman O'Neil was on the engineman's side of the cab, looking ahead, with Head Brakeman Davis on the brakeman's seat box on the left side of the cab. The engineman worked steam until after he had passed Delaware Avenue, and then shut off. At this time the fireman had just finished shoveling and was standing on the deck, preparatory to getting up on the fireman's seat box. Fireman Gerlick said that Head Brakeman Davis left the brakeman's seat box at this time and passed him without

saying anything, the fireman being of the impression that it was the intention of the head brakeman to go out and watch for a signal from the caboose. The fireman then got up on the seat box, saw the cut of cars, which was about 150 feet distant, and shouted a warning of danger; Engineman O'Neil at once applied the air brakes in emergency, which seemed to lock the wheels, and the accident occurred immediately afterwards. Fireman Garlick estimated the speed of his train to have been about 30 miles per hour between East Buffalo and International Junction, and said that the speed was reduced at the latter point; he could not, however, say what the speed was between International Junction and the point of accident as he was busy working on the fire and had only finished doing so a short time before the accident occurred. It further appeared from Fireman Garlick's statements that a terminal test of the air brakes was made by Engineman O'Neil before leaving East Buffalo, but no one told the engineman how many brakes were operative, and all they knew about the condition of the brakes was determined by the length of the blow down of the brake-valve exhaust. Fireman Garlick thoroughly understood that between East Buffalo and Black Rock all freight trains are required to be operated under the yard-limit rule, under control and prepared to stop, proceeding only as the way is seen or known to be clear, and he said that had his train been so operated the accident could have been averted.

Head Brakeman Davis, of extra 1697, estimated the speed of his train to have been about 35 miles per hour when passing Delaware Avenue; he said that he was riding on the head brakeman's seat box and was maintaining a lookout ahead and that he noticed the cut of standing cars when they were about 14 or 15 car-lengths distant. On account of the curve, however, he was not positive as to the track on which the cars were standing, consequently he shouted to the engineman and then took a second look, at which time he realized that the cars were standing on the westbound main track. Head Brakeman Davis said that the air brakes were applied in emergency when about 20 car-lengths west of Delaware Avenue, or just before the accident occurred. This head brakeman knew that the maximum speed for freight trains on the International Branch was only 20 miles per hour and said that he was concerned about the excessive speed at which the train was traveling and was prepared to say something to the engineman about it, but accented to do so no further appeared from his statements that no air brake test was made before leaving East Buffalo and he did not know whether the brakes were in proper working order, although he said he had no doubt but that they were coupled and in proper working order when the conductor gave a proceed signal. Head Brakeman Davis knew it was customary to find the main track obstructed at the point of accident, although he did not expect to find cars quite so near to

Delaware Avenue, and it was his opinion that the accident was caused by failure to operate under proper control within yard limits.

Conductor Childs, of extra 1697, coupled the air between the cars while the flagman coupled the air between the last car and the caboose. No air-brake test was made, however, and he did not know whether the air brakes were in operation; although he said that the gauge on the caboose registered 65 pounds brake-pipe pressure after the air was coupled. He was riding in the caboose and had just finished working on his reports and had gotten up to ascertain the location of the train when the air brakes were applied and then the accident occurred, at which time the speed was about 35 miles per hour. Conductor Childs knew that the speed limit for freight trains on the International Branch was 20 miles per hour and said that while he was aware the speed was excessive, and had so remarked, yet he acknowledged that he made no effort to see that it was reduced, saying that he was busy with his reports and left the question of speed to the judgment of the engineman. He admitted that he should have applied the air brakes by means of the conductor's valve in the caboose, in view of the excessive speed, and said that he would have done so had he finished his reports sooner but that the train was farther along the line than he had realized. Conductor Childs said it was the practice to leave cars standing on the main track upon arrival of trains at Black Rock, this practice being due to the limited facilities in the yard, and expressed the opinion that had his train been operated in accordance with the yard-limit rule the accident would have been prevented, the accident being due to excessive speed. Flagman Williams, who was also riding in the caboose, said that Conductor Childs had remarked about the excessive speed and that he agreed with the conductor. Flagman Williams was unaware of anything wrong until the air brakes were applied, followed by the occurrence of the accident, at which time the speed was about 35 miles per hour. Flagman Williams further stated that he boarded the caboose after the air was coupled and noticed that the air gauge registered between 60 and 70 pounds brake-pipe pressure. He did not know whether an air-brake test had been made, but said that an air-brake application was made at International Junction which reduced the ~~speed~~ to about 15 miles per hour. Flagman Williams said that in his opinion the yard-limit rule was not complied with by Engineman O'Neill.

The statements of members of the crew of extra 2443 were to the effect that on the arrival of their train at Black Rock at about 5.05 p.m. the engine and caboose

were cut off and the 67 cars were left standing on the westbound main track, in accordance with the usual practice. Preparations were then made for the return trip, no protection being required to be afforded for the cut of standing cars by the crew of extra 2443 on this occasion.

General Yardmaster Doney stated that all trains arriving at Black Rock are required to be left standing on the main track, as there is no other space available at this point, and that this has been the practice since, and also previous to, his assignment here as general yardmaster in 1921. In the event of inclement weather, however, or when the view is obscured, a red light is placed on the end of a cut of cars left under such circumstances. It further appeared from his statements that Delaware siding, located on the north side of the main track and having a capacity of 75 cars, is used for storage purposes and that if it were not for the fact that this siding is so utilized, it would be possible for arriving trains to head in on the siding at the east switch, instead of leaving their trains on the main track.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by extra 1697 being operated at excessive speed within yard limits, for which Engineman O'Neil and Conductor Childs are responsible.

Why Engineman O'Neil failed to operate his train within yard limits under proper control is not known, as he was killed in the accident. Conductor Childs acknowledged that he was aware the speed was excessive on this occasion, and had so remarked, yet he made no attempt to see that it was reduced, saying that he was busy with his reports and left the question of speed to the judgment of the engineman. Conductor Childs admitted that in view of the excessive speed he should have applied the air brakes by means of the conductor's valve in the caboose.

There was a direct conflict between the statements of the head brakeman and those of the fireman as to the warning given the engineman of the presence of the cars ahead on the main track, but in view of the fireman's inability or unwillingness to give information as to the speed of the train and his further statement that a test of the air brakes was made prior to departing from East Buffalo, which statement was not supported by any other witness, it is believed that greater credibility can be attached to the statements of the head brakeman. Judging from his statements, it appears that he did not notice the cars at the earliest possible moment, and that when he did see them he did not realize they were on the track on which his train was moving, with the result that the speed of the train was not greatly reduced prior to the

occurrence of the accident.

Under the operating rules of this railroad freight trains are required to pass through yard limits under control, prepared to stop, and proceed only as the way is seen or known to be clear. As an additional precaution, under the Hand Book of Special Instructions and Condensed Bulletins, when necessary to block running tracks within yard limits between a period of 30 minutes before sunset and 30 minutes after sunrise, it is required that proper protection be provided. On the day in question the sun set at 6 p.m., and the accident occurred at about 5.58 p.m., after the cars had been standing on the main track for a period of 53 minutes. The duty of seeing to it that proper protection was provided for these cars, which is usually fulfilled by placing a red lantern on the end car, devolved upon General Yardmaster Doney; he had, however, made no effort to provide such protection.

The yard facilities at Black Rock apparently are inadequate, necessitating all inbound crews to leave their trains on the main track, and according to the general yardmaster this condition dates back at least until 1921. The continued existence of such a condition over a period of many years, accompanied by the hazards which obviously attach to the leaving of cars upon a main track, should call for the immediate elimination of the underlying circumstances responsible for its existence, either through an enlargement of the yard facilities, or through the removal of storage cars to some other point thus permitting free use to be made of such facilities as are available.

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.