

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 STONY POINT, PA., ON
FEBRUARY 14, 1926.

March 30, 1926.

To the Commission

On February 14, 1926, there was a rear-end collision between two freight trains on the Erie Railroad at Stony Point, Pa., resulting in the death of three employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Second District of the Meadville Division, extending between Meadville, Pa., and Kent, Ohio, a distance of 89 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The accident occurred on the eastbound passing track at a point 1,450 feet east of the west switch; approaching this point from the west, beginning at the west switch, the track is tangent for a distance of about 600 feet, followed by a $1^{\circ} 30'$ curve to the right to the point of accident, 850 feet distant, and for a considerable distance beyond. The grade for eastbound trains is 0.673 per cent ascending.

The eastbound passing track is approximately 4,750 feet in length and parallels the main track on the north, while the westbound passing track is north of and parallels the eastbound passing track, it is approximately 4,125 feet in length. The tower at Stony Point is located on the south side of the tracks 3,350 feet east of the west switch of the eastbound passing track. It is the practice for eastbound trains to use the eastbound passing track and for westbound trains to use the westbound passing track. In the event a train in either direction finds that its originally designated passing track is occupied, it does not pull in on the other passing

track unless the crew has been instructed to do so by the dispatcher. In order to prevent delay and to avoid the necessity of "sawing by," it has been the practice for the dispatcher to notify eastbound trains at Atlantic, 5.1 miles west of Stony Point, that the eastbound passing track is occupied and that they are to use the westbound passing track.

At the time of the accident, which occurred between 5.30 and 5.35 a. m., there was a dense fog, which restricted vision to about one car length.

Description

Eastbound freight train third No. 86 consisted of 47 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 4207, and was in charge of Conductor Speshock and Engineman Piordan. This train left Atlantic, the last open office, 5.1 miles west of Stony Point, at 4.44 a. m., according to the train sheet, headed in at the west switch of the eastbound passing track at Stony Point, and was reported clear of the main track at 5.11 a. m. While standing on this passing track, awaiting the arrival of an opposing first-class train, its rear end was struck by train first No. 72.

Eastbound freight train first No. 72 consisted of 53 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 4129, and was in charge of Conductor Keene and Engineman Reischman. At Shenango, 15.1 miles west of Stony Point, the crew received a copy of train order No. 19, Form 31, reading in part as follows

"No 3 Eng 2920 will wait at Stony
Point until Five Forty 5.40 am
for 1st No 72 Eng 4129 ***."

This train departed from Shenango at 4.40 a. m., according to the train sheet, passed Atlantic at 5.12 a. m., at which point the dispatcher endeavored unsuccessfully to transmit information to the crew that the eastbound passing track at Stony Point was occupied, and while entering the passing track at a speed estimated to have been between 5 and 6 miles an hour collided with the rear end of train third No. 86.

The wooden caboose of train third No. 86 was crushed by the force of the impact, the wreckage then caught fire, which spread to the car ahead of the caboose and destroyed it. The head end of en-

Engine 4129 was only slightly damaged. The employees killed were the conductor, middle brakeman, and flagman, of train third No. 86, who were in the caboose at the time of the accident.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Riordan, of train third No. 86, stated that his train arrived at the west switch of the eastbound passing track at about 5.05 a. m. and was into clear at about 5.10 a. m. When approaching the tower he noticed Operator McDowell waving a stop signal with a white lantern and Fireman Donohue told him that the train-order signal was in the stop position. Engineman Riordan instructed Head Brakeman Oster to proceed to the office and ascertain what was wanted. The train was brought to a stop with the engine a short distance east of the tower and about 5 or 10 minutes later the engineman followed the head brakeman into the office. Shortly afterwards Dispatcher Heckman telephoned Operator McDowell and Enginemen Riordan presumed that the dispatcher inquired as to whether or not any members of the crew of train third No. 86 were in the office as he heard the operator reply, "yes, the engineer and head brakeman are here." Operator McDowell then turned to them and said that the dispatcher wanted some one to head train first No. 72 in on the westbound passing track. Engineman Riordan stated that he understood this remark to be directed to Head Brakeman Oster, but that the head brakeman remained in the office. The dispatcher again called within a short time and told the operator to issue instructions for train third No. 86 to double its head end in the westbound passing track, whereupon Engineman Riordan informed Operator McDowell there was not sufficient time to do this prior to the arrival of westbound train No. 3 and suggested that he be permitted to proceed to the east end of the passing track and go to Meadville ahead of train first No. 72, which arrangement he thought would avoid delay to train No. 3. Engineman Riordan then instructed Head Brakeman Oster to remain at the office and in the event the dispatcher issued instructions for their train to proceed ahead of train first No. 72, to come to the engine and let him know so that he could pull ahead as far as the east switch; immediately afterwards Engineman Riordan left the office and started for the engine and about a minute or two afterwards the accident occurred.

Head Brakeman Oster, of train third No. 86, said Operator McDowell told him that Dispatcher Heckman wanted train first No. 72 headed in on the westbound passing track and run past train third No. 86, and that at this time he asked the operator why the dispatcher had not placed a message at Atlantic to train first No. 72 to the effect that the eastbound passing track was occupied and he thought the operator said that the dispatcher did not know which passing track train third No. 86 was occupying until after train first No. 72 had passed Atlantic. Head Brakeman Oster said he knew he was the only one available in the tower to proceed to the west end of the passing track and that there was time enough for him to have gone back, but he did not think it was intended he should go, nor was he instructed to do so by the operator. He also said that Engineman Riordan, just before leaving the office and returning to the engine, instructed him to remain in the tower to ascertain what arrangements were decided upon and then to return to the engine and inform him accordingly.

Operator McDowell, stationed at Stony Point, stated that train third No. 86 was reported into clear on the eastbound passing track at 5.11 a. m. While Engineman Riordan and Head Brakeman Oster were in the office he conversed with Dispatcher Heckman over the telephone and the dispatcher instructed him to notify the head brakeman or some member of the crew of train third No. 86 to go back and notify the engineman of train first No. 72 to head in on the westbound passing track, which instructions he conveyed to Head Brakeman Oster and Engineman Riordan. He said Engineman Riordan remarked that he would pull ahead on the eastbound passing track in the event train first No. 72 pulled in behind his train, while the head brakeman asked him why the dispatcher did not notify the crew of train first No. 72 at Atlantic and was told why the dispatcher had not taken that action; the head brakeman, however, remained in the office instead of complying with the dispatcher's instructions. Operator McDowell further stated that when there were two eastbound trains to take siding at Stony Point it had been the custom for the dispatcher to instruct the crew of the second train to pull in on the westbound passing track, especially where the following train was to run around the first train, or where the eastbound passing track would not hold both trains.

Dispatcher Heckman said he had assumed that train third No. 86 would go to Geneva, 5.6 miles east of Stony Point, to meet westbound train No. 3, and when he was informed that it was on the eastbound passing track at Stony Point he communicated with the

operator at Atlantic in an endeavor to place a message at that point to the crew of train first No. 72 instructing them to use the westbound passing track but was unable to do so as that train was passing Atlantic at the time. He immediately called Operator McDowell at Stony Point and told him to have some one head train first No. 72 in at the west switch of the westbound passing track. About a minute later he again called Operator McDowell and inquired as to whether or not any one had gone back and was informed in the negative. He then inquired of Operator McDowell as to who was in the office and was informed that the engineman and head brakeman were there, whereupon he told the operator to instruct the head brakeman to go back immediately, but the operator replied that the head brakeman refused to do so, because the crew of the following train would see the caboose and then enter the westbound passing track without his presence being required. Dispatcher Heckman then instructed the operator to have train third No. 86 proceed to the east end of the eastbound passing track and double the head end of the train over on the westbound passing track, which he assumed was going to be done, not knowing differently until he was informed of the accident.

Engineman Reischman, of train first No. 72, stated that unless instructions are received that the eastbound passing track is occupied and that the westbound passing track is to be used, it is the practice for eastbound trains to use the eastbound passing track, and on arrival at Stony Point, not having been instructed otherwise, his train headed in on that track. It was extremely foggy and he operated the train at a low rate of speed, about 5 or 6 miles an hour, maintaining a careful watch of the track ahead. On reaching a point about 20 car-lengths east of the west switch Engineman Reischman saw a red marker on the rear end of the caboose of train third No. 86, apparently about 8 or 10 feet distant, and at once applied the air brakes in emergency, the accident occurring almost immediately. Engineman Reischman acknowledged his understanding that the rules required trains to move through all side tracks under control, prepared to stop in the event they are occupied. Fireman Ferlin said he was maintaining a lookout ahead while entering the passing track but that he did not see the caboose prior to the occurrence of the accident.

Head Brakeman Craven, of train first No. 72, stated that on arrival at Stony Point it was

very foggy, he opened the west switch of the east-bound passing track and then, as an extra precaution, walked ahead to the west switch of the westbound passing track, which leads off from the eastbound passing track to see that the switch was properly closed. Afterwards he boarded the engine as it passed him, and the first knowledge he had of anything wrong was when the air brakes were applied in emergency.

Conductor Keene and Flagman Leonard, of train first No. 72, were in their caboose and knew of nothing wrong prior to the occurrence of the accident. Conductor Keene at once started for the head end of the train and had reached a point about 9 or 10 car-lengths from the engine when he saw Engineman Reischman coming toward him, Conductor Keene was then informed as to what had occurred and he said that through the fog he was able to see the reflection of the fire although he could not tell what was burning.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of the crew of train third No. 86 to take proper precautions for the safety of their train in view of the existing weather conditions.

The crews of each of the trains involved knew of the practice of giving a message to the crew of an eastbound train at Atlantic when it was desired to have that train enter the westbound passing track at Stony Point, either because of the fact that the following train was to be run around the train already occupying the eastbound passing track or because that track would not hold both trains. It was with this practice in view that the dispatcher attempted to send a message to the crew of train first No. 72 at Atlantic, and, failing in this, that he instructed the operator at Stony Point to have some one go back and head train first No. 72 in on the westbound passing track. While the evidence was conflicting as to the manner in which the operator issued these instructions, it was equally clear that Head Brakemen Oster knew exactly what the dispatcher wanted and that the head brakeman was fully informed as to the existing situation. It was not his duty to raise any questions as to how the dispatcher was running the railroad, all he had to do was to obey instructions, and had he attempted to carry out those instructions it is very probable

that he would have reached the rear end of his train in time to open the west switch of the westbound passing track prior to the arrival of train first No. 72, in which event the accident would not have occurred. Engineman Fioran, of train third No. 86, was in the office at the time, was fully informed as to all the circumstances and of the instructions issued by the dispatcher, and in the absence of the conductor possessed the authority to see that the head brakeman obeyed, for his failure to do so he is equally at fault with Head Brakeman Oster for the occurrence of the accident.

It was customary when a train entered the eastbound passing track at Stony Point for the conductor and middle brakeman to start forward looking over their train, the conductor afterwards proceeding to the tower for such instructions as might be awaiting him. Why this was not done in this case is a matter of speculation, as is also the case with the question of why none of the three men in the caboose failed to hear the approach of train first No. 72 in time to get out of the caboose before the accident occurred. Some one of them must have been awake when their train reached Stony Point, as the head brakeman of train first No. 72 found the main-track switch in the closed position, whether all were asleep at the time of the accident, or whether they supposed that the following train was heading in on the westbound passing track, can not be definitely stated. In any event, under the conditions existing, some one of them should have been paying attention to the rear of their train with a view to preventing just such an accident as actually occurred. Had any attempt been made to warn the engine crew of train first No. 72, the accident undoubtedly would have been averted.

All 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.