INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE ERIE RAILROAD NEAR WHEATLAND, PA., ON JANUARY 22, 1930.

March 8, 1930

To the Commission:

On January 22, 1930, there was a rear-end collision between a Pittsburgh & Lake Erie freight train and an Erie freight train on the tracks of the Erie Railroad near Wheatland, Pa., which resulted in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Ferrona Branch of the Mahoning Division, which extends between Ferrona and Gardner Avenue, New Castle, Pa., a distance of 23.4 miles, and is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. The Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad has trackage rights over this branch of the Erie Railroad. This accident occurred at a point about 1,600 feet west of Wheatland, which is located within yard limits that extend between West Middlesex and Ferrona, a distance of 6.5 miles. Approaching the point of accident from the east, the track is tangent for a distance of 1,175 feet, followed by a compound curve to the right 1,265 feet in length, varying in curvature from 5° 30' to 2° 30', the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 250 feet from its western end, where the curvature is at its minimum. The grade is 0.37 per cent ascending for westbound trains at the point of accident.

Under the rules, it is not necessary for any engine or train occupying the main track inside of established yard limits to be protected by flagman, except when on the time of a first-class train, or when the view of an approaching train is obscure, or in foggy or stormy weather. It is required that all trains, except first-class trains, approach and pass through yard limits under control, prepared to stop, and proceed only as the way is seen or known to be clear. Special instructions in the time-table restrict the speed of all trains to 25 miles per hour within the yard limits in which this accident occurred.

The manual block signals in use on this line are of the three-position, upper-quadrant type, the indications being red, yellow, and green, for stop, caution, and proceed, respectively. There is only one block station for night operation between New Castle and Ferrona and it is located at Pulaski, 8 miles east of Wheatland.

The weather was dark and clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 12.10 or 12.12 a.m.

Description

Westbound Pittsburgh & Lake Erie freight train extra 199 consisted of 80 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 199, and was in charge of Conductor Thompson and Engineman Connors. This train departed from New Castle, Pa., at 8.39 p.m., January 21, stopped on the main track with the engine located at Farrell, 1 mile west of Wheatland, at 10.25 p.m., and had been standing there about 1 hour and 45 minutes when it was struck by westbound Erie extra 1722.

Westbound Erie freight train extra 1722 consisted of 54 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1722, and was in charge of Conductor Wilbur and Engineman Wrynn. This train departed from New Castle at 10.30 p.m., January 21, passed Pulaski, the last open office, at 11.36 p.m., with the block signal displaying a caution indication, and collided with Pittsburgh & Lake Erie extra 199 while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been from 8 to 15 miles per hour.

The caboose of extra 199 was so badly damaged that it was later destroyed, the car next to the caboose was derailed and turned over on its right side parallel to the track, while the second car from the caboose was off center but was not derailed. Engine 1722 was considerably damaged, none of the equipment of extra 1722 was derailed. The employee killed was the flagman of extra 199.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Connors, of extra 199, stated that he stopped his train at Farrell to await instructions to enter the yard at Ferrona, which is 2.5 miles beyond, and the train had been there for some time when he noticed an application of the air brakes. He thought that it probably was due to a brake-pipe leak and sent some one back over the train to find it, as he was not aware at that time that an accident had occurred. Engineman Connors said he was thoroughly familiar with the operating rules of the Erie Railroad over this branch and understood that it is

not necessary to flag within yard limits except when the view is obstructed by weather conditions. It was dark and clear on the night of the accident and he could see back along his train about a distance of 50 car-lengths, his view being obstructed at that point by the curve.

Conductor Thompson, of extra 199, stated that when his train stopped at Farrell, Brakeman Kelly and Flagman Freniere were in the caboose with him Conductor Thompson and Brakeman Kelly went to the head end of the train, while Flagman Freniere remained on the rear platform of the caboose. From time to time they reported by telephone to the dispatcher at Ferrona and when they finally received permission to proceed, they found that they had no air on the train. Conductor Thompson and Brakeman Kelly then went back along the train and discovered that the rear of their train had been struck, and the flagman had been killed. Conductor Thompson stated that when he left the rear of his train, the flagman appeared to be normal and did not seem to be drowsy. Flagman Freniere had worked with him about four years and was familiar with the operating rules on that branch, and under the conditions that existed at that time, Conductor Thompson did not consider it necessary to flag at that point and did not instruct the flagman to do so.

The remaining members of the crew of extra 199 also stated that it was dark and clear on the night of the accident, that they saw no smoke blowing over the tracks from nearby factories nor did they hear any whistle signals of an approaching train, although it is doubtful if they could have been heard at the head end of the train. They all were familiar with the operating rule on that branch that it was not necessary to flag within yard limits unless the view is obscured, except Brakeman Kelly, who had operated over the branch only a few times. With the exception of the flagman, the crew of extra 199 was at the head end of the train practically the entire time their train was standing at Farrell.

Engineman Wrynn, of extra 1722, stated that after testing the air brakes at New Castle, he proceeded on a clear signal indication, at Pulaski he received a caution indication, which indicated a train ahead. On approaching Church Street crossing, about 50 car-lengths east of the point of accident, he was operating his train at a speed between 20 and 25 miles per hour and sounded the usual crossing whistle signal, he then sounded the whistle about three times between that point and Mercers Works crossing,

located close to the point of accident, as there were workmen passing over this crossing to and from the American Sheet and Tin Plate Plant. He was watching these men and did not see the caboose of extra 199 until he reached this crossing, at which time he was about four or five car-lengths from the rear of extra 199. Engineman Wrynn immediately applied the air brakes in emergency, sounded the whistle signal, and called to the other men on the engine, and he thought the speed of his train had been reduced to 15 miles per hour by the time the accident occurred. He stated that the two markers on the caboose were burning red, but he did not see the cupola light, there were no torpedoes down nor fusees displayed, and he did not see any member of the crew around the caboose. Engineman Wrynn further stated that on rounding the curve he had looked across it several times, and even though his attention might have been distracted by the men at the crossing, he gave it his first consideration to look for a caboose because he knew there was a long train ahead of him. He also said that while the factory opposite the point of accident has numerous gas jets and smoke stacks, he could not say whether or not there was any smoke escaping from these stacks at the time of the accident which might have obstructed his view, but there are times when lights from street cars and automobiles on the highway at that point interfere with his view of the track ahead, and at the time of the accident there was a street car and automobiles at that point. Engineman Wrynn fully understood the rules governing the operation of trains within yard limits, and also the block-signal rules, and knew that if he was not prepared to stop short of any obstruction he would be responsible for the violation of these rules. He could not recall a previous trip under similar circumstances where he had been flagged by a train occupying the main track, nor had he ever had any difficulty in stopping his train when he found that the main track was occupied, and in this particular case it was his idea that he could have stopped easily had he noticed the markers when they first came within his range of vision.

Fireman O'Malley, of extra 1722, stated that he was riding on his own side of the engine and at intervals both he and Head Brakeman Hill looked out on left hand curves for a train ahead, as instructed by Engineman Wrynn, but approaching the point of accident they were not in position to see the track ahead on account of a curve to the right. The first intimation he had of

anything wrong was when the engineman applied the air brakes in emergency, sounded the whistle, and warned them of a train ahead. He immediately jumped off the engine, and as he did so he noticed the red markers and the cupola light burning on the caboose. Fireman O'Malley said that the air brakes had been tested before leaving New Castle and he thought that the speed of the train had been reduced to about 8 miles per hour when the collision occurred. He further stated that the engineman sounded the usual whistle signals for the crossings en route. The statements of Head Brakeman Hill substantiated those of Fireman O'Malley with the exception of the speed of the train at the time of the accident, which he thought was about 15 miles per hour, and due to the curve Head Brakeman Hill could see only one marker light.

Conductor Wilbur, of extra 1722, was riding in the caboose at the time of the accident. He said they had been traveling at a speed of 15 or 20 miles per hour, and in this particular instance he was unable to say whether or not the speed was such that the train could have been stopped in half the length of vision. During the 25 or 30 years he had been running over this branch, he has never had any difficulty previous to this trip in having his train stopped before an accident occurred when the main track was occupied by another train. He considered Engineman Wrynn a very careful man and had never had any reason to caution him about exceeding the speed at any time. Conductor Wilbur also stated it was his practice, when his own train stopped in the immediate vicinity of the point of accident, to have the flagman go back four or five car-lengths east of Mercers Works crossing and place torpedoes and to be on the lookout for approaching trains. On this particular occasion, however, his own flagman did not afford any protection for the rear of his train until about one-half hour after the occurrence of the accident.

Brakeman Hackett, of extra 1722, was riding in the caboose and did not know at the time that an accident had occurred. Flagman Hood, who also was in the caboose, was under the impression that their train had broken in two, so proceeded toward the head end of the train and found that they had had a collision. About one-half hour later, he went to the rear end of his train and placed some torpedoes on the rail, although the rules did not require him to do so.

Several nights after the occurrence of the accident, with weather conditions the same as on the night of the accident, a test was conducted to ascertain the distance a caboose could be seen standing at the point of accident from an approaching west-bound train, and it was found that it could be seen for a distance of 950 feet.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Wrynn, of extra 1722, to operate his train under proper control within yard limits.

Engineman Wrynn was fully aware of the fact that there was a long train ahead of him and that he was within yard limits, and although the weather was clear and he had an unobstructed view of the caboose of extra 199 for a distance of 950 feet, yet it is apparent that he was giving his attention to the road crossing just east of the point of accident, and the result was that he did not see the caboose until it was only four or five car-lengths distant.

All of the employees involved were experienced men with the exception of Brakeman Kelly, of extra 199, who entered service on January 8, 1929, and Head Brakeman Hill, of extra 1722, who entered service on October 18, 1929. 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.