

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE GALVESTON, HARRISBURG & SAN ANTONIO RAILWAY NEAR NOONAN, TEXAS, ON OCTOBER 3, 1924.

October 28, 1924.

To the Commission:

On October 3, 1924, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio Railway, Southern Pacific Lines, near Noonan, Texas, which resulted in the death of two employees and the injury of two employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Del Rio Subdivision of the Houston Division, which extends between Del Rio and East Yard, near San Antonio, Texas, a distance of 171.1 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, automatic block signals are installed to protect movements in the vicinity of certain sidings, one of which is Noonan. The point of accident was about 2 miles east of Noonan; approaching this point from the west there are several short curves and tangents, followed by about 1,500 feet of tangent and a 3° curve to the left about 1,500 feet in length, the accident occurring on the curve about 400 feet from its eastern end. Approaching from the east there are about 3,800 feet of tangent, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade from the west is ascending for about 1 1/3 miles, descending for about 2,200 feet, and then practically level for a few hundred feet to the point of accident, approaching from the east the grade is descending for about 4,500 feet and then practically level for about 1,000 feet to the point of accident. The view across the inside of the curve is restricted to about 900 feet.

The signal installation at Noonan is the Southern Pacific standard station protection, with home signals governing the approach to each of the passing-track switches. The outlying home signals are about 2 1/2 miles in advance of the switches, and the westbound outlying home signal for Noonan passing track is 850 feet east of where the accident occurred, this being signal 2383. A stop indication is displayed by this signal as soon as an eastbound engine passes the westbound home signal at the east end of

Noonan passing track. The signals are of the one-arm, two-position, lower-quadrant type.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at 9.26 a.m.

Description

Westbound freight train extra 764 consisted of 46 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 764, and was in charge of Conductor Webster and Engineman Lovelady. Before departing from East Yard at 8 a.m. the crew received among others a copy of train order No. 22, on Form 19, providing for a meet with eastbound extra 759 at Dunlay, 7.77 miles west of Noonan. This order was made complete at 6.45 a.m. On arriving at LaCoste, 6.83 miles east of Noonan, the crew received train order No. 37, providing for a meet with extra 759 at Noonan instead of at Dunlay. Extra 764 left LaCoste at 9.10 a.m., passed signal 2383 in the stop position, and collided with extra 759 a short distance beyond the signal while traveling at a speed thought to have been about 15 miles an hour.

Eastbound freight train extra 759 consisted of 48 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 759, and was in charge of Conductor Johnson and Engineman Puckett. It left Hondo, 17.61 miles west of Noonan and the last open office, at 8.43 a.m. without any orders relating to extra 764, passed Noonan without stopping, and collided with extra 764 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 25 or 30 miles an hour.

Engine 764 was derailed but remained upright and was quite badly damaged, the first three cars in this train were demolished. Engine 759 was not derailed, with the exception of its pony truck, but was quite badly damaged; the first 10 cars in this train were entirely derailed and 7 of them were practically demolished. The employees killed were the engineman of extra 759, and also the conductor of that train, who was riding on the engine.

Summary of evidence

Operator Huff, on duty at Hondo from midnight until 8 a.m., said he received train order No. 32, addressed to extra 759, he also had received train orders Nos. 24 and 25, addressed to a westbound extra, and he said that after delivering those two orders apparently he filed train order No. 22 along with his file copies of train orders Nos. 24 and 25, and when Operator Crouch relieved him at 8 a.m. Operator Huff did not know any orders in the transfer book. When he was called from his home by Operator Crouch after the occurrence of the accident he found the operator's

copies of train orders Nos. 22, 24 and 25 on the hook where he had filed them. The copies of the order intended for the engineman and conductor of extra 759 could not be found, nor was Operator Huff able to say what had become of them, although by that time the porter had emptied the waste basket, burning the contents, and it is possible this explains their disappearance.

Operator Crouch said that when extra 759 first appeared he asked the dispatcher to clear a train approaching from the west, not knowing what train it was that was coming. At first the dispatcher did not answer, being busy with another party on the wire, but in a moment the dispatcher gave him train order No. 34, addressed to extra 759, this order providing for a meet with a train not involved in the accident, and after receiving this order Operator Crouch asked the dispatcher to clear extra 759 with train order No. 34, which was done.

Dispatcher Poag, who went on duty at 8 a.m., said he checked the transfer thoroughly and signed for it. At about 8.25 a.m. Operator Crouch told him there was an eastbound extra approaching Hondo and he told the operator to wait a minute, as he was trying to complete an order to another station and seemed to be unable to make the conductor at the latter point understand, this being due to a noisy telephone circuit. The operator at Hondo again said the extra was coming and Dispatcher Poag then gave him train order No. 34, after which Operator Crouch asked him to clear the extra with that order and he gave the Operator his O.K. while trying at the same time to listen to the conductor at the other station. After extra 759 had been reported as leaving Hondo, so that he knew about what progress the train was making, Dispatcher Poag issued train order No. 37 to extra 764 at LaCoste providing for the meet at Noonan instead of at Dunlay, apparently thinking that extra 759 already had train order No. 22 and that when it reached Dunlay the conductor would get in communication with him and he would then give him train order No. 37, advancing the train from Dunlay to Noonan, in fact, he said he reported the wire trouble to the wire chief but asked him not to cut the telephone until after an extra had reported for orders at Dunlay. At about 9.40 a.m. Operator Crouch told him there had been an accident and on checking back on the train-order book he discovered for the first time that train order No. 22 had not been delivered to the crew of extra 759 at Hondo. Dispatcher Poag was unable to account for his error in clearing the train at Hondo without the order except for the fact that he was having difficulty in talking at the same time with the conductor on the telephone at another station and in his hurry he did not properly check the orders, he said he was depending

upon his memory to keep track of outstanding orders and that in this case his memory failed.

Engineman Lovelady, of extra 764, said that at LaCoste he received a copy of train order No. 37 changing the meet with extra 759 from Dunlay to Noonan. Approaching signal 2383 he observed it displaying a stop indication, made a 12-pound brake-pipe reduction, passed the signal at a low rate of speed and then released the brakes, at the same time discussing with Conductor Webster, who was riding on the engine, as to whether they should proceed slowly and not delay first-class train No. 8, which was to wait for them at Noonan until 9.40 a.m. Engineman Lovelady estimated the speed of his train when passing signal 2383 to have been about 6 miles an hour and said that just after passing it he saw extra 759 coming around the curve and at once applied the air brakes in emergency, he thought his train had stopped by the time the collision occurred. Engineman Lovelady thoroughly understood that under rule 509 he should have proceeded only under flag protection, but both he and the conductor concluded it would be safe to proceed cautiously. Conductor Webster corroborated the statements of Engineman Lovelady and was positive his train was standing at the time of the accident. Fireman Howard's statements differed in one important detail, the fireman saying that the train approached signal 2383 at a speed of 45 or 25 miles an hour and that the speed was about 20 miles an hour when he jumped just before the accident occurred. Head Brakeman Lamer, who was riding on the tender, said the engine passed signal 2383 at a speed of 15 miles an hour, while Flagman Atchison said the speed was about 4 or 5 miles an hour when the accident occurred.

Fireman Tindell, of extra 759, said his train passed Noonan at a speed of 18 or 20 miles an hour and as it was rounding the curve on which the accident occurred he saw extra 764 approaching, at which time the engine of each train was working steam, and he said he called to the engineman to apply the air brakes. Fireman Tindell estimated the speed of his train to have been 25 or 30 miles an hour when he first saw extra 764. Head Brakeman Thurman was in the caboose and his first knowledge of danger was when the accident occurred, at which time his train was moving at a speed of 25 or 30 miles an hour. His statements were corroborated by those of Flagman Horan.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by failure to deliver a meet order, for which Dispatcher Poag and Operator Huff are responsible.

Train order No. 22 directed extra 759 to meet extra 764 at Dunlay, being put out to extra 759 at Hondo. In some unexplained manner Operator Huff placed this order on file along with some others which he had delivered to the crew of another train and therefore he did not enter the order on his transfer to Operator Crouch at the time he went off duty. When extra 759 arrived at Hondo, Operator Crouch asked Dispatcher Poag to clear the train on another order which had been issued subsequently, the operator not knowing anything about train order No. 22, and the dispatcher cleared the train accordingly.

Dispatcher Poag had signed the transfer when he went on duty, this transfer showing that train order No. 22 was then outstanding for extra 759 at Hondo. When extra 759 reached Hondo, however, Dispatcher Poag was endeavoring to complete an order over the telephone to a conductor at another station, forgot that train order No. 22 was still outstanding, and cleared extra 759 without the order. Had this order been delivered, extra 759 would have had to stop at Dunlay and Dispatcher Poag then would have given it the order which changed its meeting point with extra 764 from Dunlay to Noonan.

Extra 764 should have stopped at signal 2383 and then have proceeded only under flag protection. Under the circumstances, however, it is doubtful whether there would have been any opportunity of providing such protection in time to avert the accident, but with the train standing at the signal the range of vision of the fireman of extra 759 across the inside of the curve would have been increased to about 1,200 feet, and it is probable that the results would have been much less disastrous and that all the members of the crew of extra 759 would have had an opportunity of getting off before the accident occurred. While Engineer and Lovelady and Conductor Webster can not be held responsible for the occurrence of this accident, they are open to criticism for disregarding the stop indication of an automatic signal with the idea of taking a chance on reaching Noonan in safety.

Had an adequate block-signal system been in use on this line this accident probably would not have occurred, an adequate automatic train stop or train control device

would have prevented it.

All the employees involved were experienced men. At the time of accident Dispatcher Toag had been on duty about 1 1/2 hours, while Operator Huff had been on duty 8 hours when relieved by Operator Crouch at 8 a.m.; each of these employees had been off duty 16 hours. The crew of extra 759 had been on duty nearly 7 hours and the crew of extra 764 about 2 1/2 hours, previous to which the members of each crew had been off duty from 15 to 31 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W.P. BORLAND,

Director.