

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE  
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE  
GEORGIA SOUTHERN & FLORIDA RAILWAY, SOUTHERN RAILWAY  
SYSTEM, AT CHULA, GA , ON MARCH 14, 1927.

March 30, 1927.

To the Commission:

On March 14, 1927, there was a collision between a passenger train and a cut of standing cars on the Georgia Southern and Florida Railway, Southern Railway System, at Chula, Ga., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of three passengers and one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the line extending between Macon and Valdosta, Ga., a distance of 151.6 miles, and in the vicinity of the point of accident it is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred on the house track at Chula; this house track, which is located on the east side of the main track, is 893 feet in length, the north switch being about 500 feet north of the station. Approaching this switch from the north there is a 2° curve to the left, 994 feet of tangent and then a 3° curve to the right 635 feet in length, followed by tangent track extending to the switch, a distance of about 38 feet, and for a considerable distance beyond that point. The grade is 0.89 per cent descending for southbound trains for a distance of about 1,500 feet, followed by 300 feet of 0.79 per cent ascending grade extending to the point of accident.

The switch leading to the house track has a No. 10 turn-out and is equipped with a Ramapo stand located on the fireman's side of a southbound train; the centers of the targets are 8 feet 3 inches above the head-block ties. When the switch is closed a white circular target is displayed, while a red arrow-shaped target is displayed when the switch is open. The corresponding colors displayed by the switch lamp are green and red. There was a derail located on the north end of the house track about 20 feet from the clearance point.

The weather was clear and dusk was falling at the time of the accident, which occurred at 6.50 p m.

### Description

Southbound passenger train No. 5 consisted of one combination baggage car and coach, one coach, one sleeping car, one dining car and five sleeping cars, in the order named, hauled by engine 1284, and was in charge of Conductor Wrigley and Engineer Berg. This train passed Ashburn, 15.3 miles from Chula and the last open office, at 6.31 p.m., 25 minutes late, approached Chula at a speed estimated to have been from 35 to 45 miles per hour, entered on the house track at that point, the switch having been left open, and collided with some freight cars which were standing on the house track.

The train was not derailed at the switch, but on account of the fact that the cars on the house track were close to the derail it was impossible to say whether the engine was derailed as a result of colliding with the cars or as a result of coming into contact with the derail. In either event, however, the engine turned over to the right and came to rest to the left of the house track with its tender lying across the house track and fouling the main track. The first three cars and the forward truck of the fourth car were derailed but none of them was overturned. There were 11 freight cars on the house track, 3 of which were demolished. The employee killed was the engineer.

### Summary of evidence

Fireman Hight said the train was approaching Chula at a speed of 40 or 45 miles per hour and that his first knowledge of anything wrong was when the engineman applied the air brakes in emergency and called to him to look out, he then saw that the switch was open. Fireman Hight estimated that the engine was within 75 yards of the switch when the engineman called to him. Shortly after the occurrence of the accident the fireman went back to look at the switch and found that it was open and had been locked in that position, the lamp was not burning. Conductor Wrigley's statements as to the position of the switch after the accident agreed with those of Fireman Hight, while the baggage master and flagman said they went out to protect the train by flag and did not examine the switch. The statements of all these members of the train crew indicated that the brakes were applied only a few seconds before they felt the impact of the collision.

Section Foreman Ulm said he had been installing some insulated joints on the north end of the house track and that his push car had been placed on that end of the track while the work was in progress. After considerable questioning he finally admitted that he could not say positively whether this push car was lifted from the main track by hand and placed on the house track or whether the switch was opened and the car moved <sup>through</sup> it. When the work was nearly

completed, however, he sent four men to move the push car back to the main track in order to be in readiness to load the tools and quit work for the day. These men were supposed to lift the car by hand and place it back on the main track and Section Foreman Ulm claimed that he saw it handled in this manner. He did not, however, observe the position of the switch or notice that the lamp was not lighted, and he said he did not know whether or not any of his men had a switch key. His own switch key was in his pocket and according to his statements he never allowed any of his men to use it.

Section Laborers Hill, Marchant, Bryant, Harrell and Burke said that the push car was lifted from the house track and moved by hand to the main track, but in subsequent statements all of them retracted their statements and admitted that the switch was used in making the movement, with Section Laborer Bryant handling the switch. It also appeared from their statements that Section Laborer Burke carried the section foreman's key the majority of the time and that on this occasion he had given it to Section Laborer Bryant for use in opening the switch.

Further questioning of Section Laborer Bryant brought out the fact that after the push car had been moved through the switch to the main track he closed the switch and then as the men started to move the car southward he again opened the switch "for fun", making it necessary for the other men to move the car northward again before the switch points could be clear, he then closed the switch a second time and after the push car had passed over the points he opened it and locked it in that position. He was unable to explain why he took this action. Section Laborer Bryant did not accompany the men when they finally left the scene with the push car nor was he with them when they set the push car off the track and took their motor car to the tool house, having gone to his home instead. Shortly afterwards Section Laborer Harrell came to his home to obtain the switch key so that the tool house could be opened for the purpose of putting away the motor car and it was not long after this before Section Laborer Harrell returned and told him of the occurrence of the accident. It was at this time that he remembered having left the switch open. On going to the station with Section Laborer Harrell they met Section Foreman Ulm, who told him not to let any one know that he had been in possession of the switch key and to say that the push car had been lifted by hand from the main track to the house track at the time they began work at this point and that it had been moved back to the main track in a similar manner when the work was completed.

An examination of the switch lamp, which was not burning at the time of the accident, indicated that it had received poor attention. It was dirty, with the track in bad condition, and it was in such shape that it could not have

given satisfactory service. A test made on a clear day with the sun shining brightly showed that the switch target was visible a distance of about 1,000 feet, although a line of telegraph poles on the engineman's side of the track interfered with the view to some extent.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch, for which Section Foreman Ulm is primarily responsible.

The evidence indicated that the section foreman habitually allowed one of the men in his crew to keep the switch key in his possession, that this man gave the key to another one of the section laborers for the purpose of enabling them to use the switch when moving the push car from the house track to the main track, and that for some unexplained reason this other section laborer after closing the switch again opened it and locked it in the open position. The work of moving the push car <sup>out</sup> on the main track and opening and closing the switch was done within view of the section foreman and all he had to do was to look in that direction and he would have seen what was being done and would have seen that the switch was left in the open position, with the lamp extinguished. The section foreman and also the laborers claimed that the switch had not been used, but afterwards the laborers admitted the facts in the case and described in detail how the various movements were made. As previously stated, Section Foreman Ulm was in plain view, he was accountable for the proper handling of the switch by his men, and was not supposed to have allowed any of them to keep the key in his possession. Under such circumstances he is considered responsible for the occurrence of the accident, although the switch was actually handled by another member of his crew.

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.