

In re investigation of accident on the Great  
Northern Railroad, near Rexford, Mont.,  
October 31, 1913.

January 5, 1914.

On October 31, 1913, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a work train on the Great Northern Railway near Rexford, Mont., resulting in the death of two employees and the injury of one passenger, 12 employees and 5 mail clerks.

After investigation of this accident the Chief Inspector of Safety Appliances reports as follows:

The second district of the Kallispell Division of the Great Northern Railway, on which this collision occurred, is a single track line, extending from Whitefish to Troy, Mont., a distance of 134.62 miles. The train dispatching system by telephone is used on this line, no block signals being used.

The trains involved in this collision were passenger train No. 4, consisting of locomotive 1434 and 7 passenger cars, en route from Seattle, Washington, to St. Paul, Minn., and westbound extra work train 1433, consisting of locomotive 1433, one empty and 6 loaded freight cars and a caboose, en route from Rexford, Mont. to points on the line between Stonehill and Tweed, Mont., where track repairs were being made. On this division the speed of eastbound passenger trains is limited to 50 miles per hour, and of westbound freight trains to 30 miles per hour. At the time of the accident the weather was dark and cloudy and the rail was frosty.

The collision occurred at a point about 7.75 miles west of

Rexford, between the non-telegraph aidings Ronde and Stonehill. The line of the Great Northern Railway between Rexford and Troy, Mont. follows the Kootenai River. Approaching the scene of the accident from the east there is a curve to the south about 375 feet in length, followed by a tangent 1800 feet long. The collision occurred at about the middle of this tangent, where the track is laid along the side of a mountain. There is a high bank on the south side of the track 15 feet from the rail and a 40-foot fill on the north side of the track at the bottom of which flows the river. At this point there is a slight descending grade from the east. The vision of the engineman approaching from the east is obscured until within 900 feet of the point of collision. Approaching the scene of the accident from the west there is a 6° curve to the south about 582 feet in length. The vision of the engineman approaching from the west is obscured until within 900 feet of the point of collision.

Eastbound passenger train No. 4, in charge of Conductor Corwin and Engineman Jones, arrived at Stonehill at 6:54 a.m., 1 hour and 10 minutes late, and waited there for westbound passenger train No. 43. At 7:10 a.m. train No. 43, in charge of Conductor Williams and Engineman Wright, left Rexford, 11.9 miles east of Stonehill, with an order to meet No. 4 at Stonehill. Just as No. 43 was about to leave Rexford Conductor Shanahan, of extra 1433, directed brakeman Mathias to board train No. 43 and "go to Stonehill and hold everything." In obedience to this direction brakeman Mathias rode to Stonehill on Train No. 43 where No. 4 was waiting. Upon the arrival of train No. 43 at Stonehill train No. 4

started toward Rexford, brakeman Mathias having neglected to hold it as directed, and collided with extra 1433 at about 7:35 a.m., while running at a speed of about 25 miles per hour.

Westbound extra 1433, in charge of Conductor Shanahan and Engineman Sullivan, left Rexford at approximately 7:25 a.m. The engine was backing, drawing the cars and caboose after it. It was running at a speed of about 15 miles per hour at the time of the collision.

Engine 1434 of train No. 4 was thrown from the track on the north side, coming to rest at the edge of the river about 40 feet from the track. The tender frame remained attached to the engine, the trucks were demolished and the cistern was torn loose from the frame. The forward end of mail car No. 938, the first car in the train, was crushed back to the bolster and very badly damaged. This car was thrown from the track to the north and came to rest on its side on the embankment, with the forward end in the river, the rear end remaining on the grade attached to the baggage car by the safety chain on the north side. The other cars in this train were not damaged and remained on the track. The engineman and fireman of train No. 4 were killed.

The tender of engine No. 1433 of the work train was totally demolished. The engine remained upright on the track, but the cab was torn away and the pilot and pilot beam broken. The first car of this train, loaded with track bolts, was telescoped about 15 feet by engine 1433. The other cars in this train were not damaged.

Conductor Shanahan stated that while his train was at Rexford he requested the operator there to ask the dispatcher at Whitefish

if he could put a flag on 43, which was then ready to leave, to hold all trains at Stonehill until he got there with his work train, and that the operator told him the dispatcher said it would be all right for him to do so. He then asked the operator to give brakeman Mathias a message to ride on train No. 43, which the operator did. He then directed Mathias to go to Stonehill and hold everything until his train arrived there. Shanahan stated that although it was unusual and contrary to regular practice to hold a first-class passenger train for a freight train, still he thought that he was justified in holding this train 10 or 15 minutes, thereby getting supplies to the repair gangs in time to keep them at work.

Engineman Sullivan stated that his train was running about 25 miles per hour as it rounded the east curve and that when he saw No. 4 coming toward him he immediately applied the emergency and independent brakes, called to his fireman, and jumped off. He estimated that his train was running about 15 miles per hour at the time of the collision.

Flagman Mathias of work extra No. 1433 stated that he was working his fourth day on this train and that he received verbal instructions from Conductor Shanahan at Roxford to go on train 43 to Stonehill and hold everything; his understanding of these instructions was that he was to hold everything but first-class trains, as therefore when he was to hold first-class trains he was so instructed, the number of the first-class train being given him. Conductor Shanahan stated that on the day before the collision he directed Mathias to hold everything at Stonehill and that he did hold No. 3, a regular passenger train, although he was not told specifically to

hold first-class trains. Brakeman Mathias stated that when he reached Stonehill train No. 4 immediately started east. He stated that he understood the work train would wait for No. 4 at Rexford and would not follow No. 43 to Stonehill. He said he had never been instructed or examined on the rules of the company and only once had he discussed the flagging rules with an employee of the company.

Train dispatcher Cobb stated that he was on duty on the date of the collision and that the operator at Rexford asked him if Conductor Shanahan could put a flag on 43 to get out of Rexford against No. 4, and that he told him that Shanahan could flag on 43 to Rondo, 4.74 miles west of Rexford. This statement is corroborated by operator Griffin in the dispatcher's office at Whitefish. The dispatcher stated he intended the flagman to hold No. 4 at Rondo for extra 1433; he did not send this message by wire addressed to the conductor of extra 1433, as he was very busy with other duties, and told the operator at Rexford to write out the message to the conductor. He stated that his usual practice in sending instructions of this kind was to make messages of them.

Operator Woodhull at Rexford stated his instructions from dispatcher Cobb were to tell Conductor Shanahan to put a flag on train No. 43 to Stonehill and that he immediately delivered the message to Shanahan. He stated that he did not write out this message, but at the request of Conductor Shanahan he did write "flag on 43 to Stonehill," and gave <sup>it</sup> to Conductor Shanahan, who handed it to brakeman Mathias, and that he intended this writing to be a message for the transportation of Mathias from Rexford to Stonehill.

He stated that he heard Shanahan tell Mathias to "hold everything at Stonehill until we get there."

Conductor Corwin of train No. 4 stated that he did not see Flagman Mathias at Stonehill and he had no instructions to hold his train at that point for work extra 1435. He stated that just before the brakes were applied his train was running about 50 miles per hour, but the speed was reduced to about 25 miles per hour at the time of the collision. An examination of the drivers on engine 1434 disclosed flat spots, which indicated a very heavy application of the brakes which caused the wheels to slide before the collision.

The direct cause of this collision was the failure of Flagman Mathias to obey his instructions to hold all trains at Stonehill, due no doubt to his failure to understand exactly what his instructions meant and to his unfamiliarity with the rules and railroad practices. Conductor Shanahan was also at fault for attempting a movement of this character against a first-class train and for his failure to make sure that the flagman thoroughly understood his instructions and duties. Flagging instructions of this character should be in writing.

Had the dispatcher employed a message in this case, as he stated was his usual practice, the misunderstanding regarding the point where the work train was to meet No. 4 would have been averted.

Conductor Shanahan had been employed by various railroad companies in the capacity of trainman, yardmaster, brakeman and conductor for about 15 years. He was dismissed in 1909 for overlooking orders, resulting in a collision. Since that date his record was good.

Brakeman Mathias had been in the Railroad service for 13 1/2 months, 9 months of which had been with Great Northern Railway Company, he had never been examined on the rules. Dispatcher Cobb and operator Woodhull were experienced men with good records.

None of the employees involved were on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.