

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD AT TANGIPAHOA,
LA., ON MAY 18, 1930.

June 17, 1930.

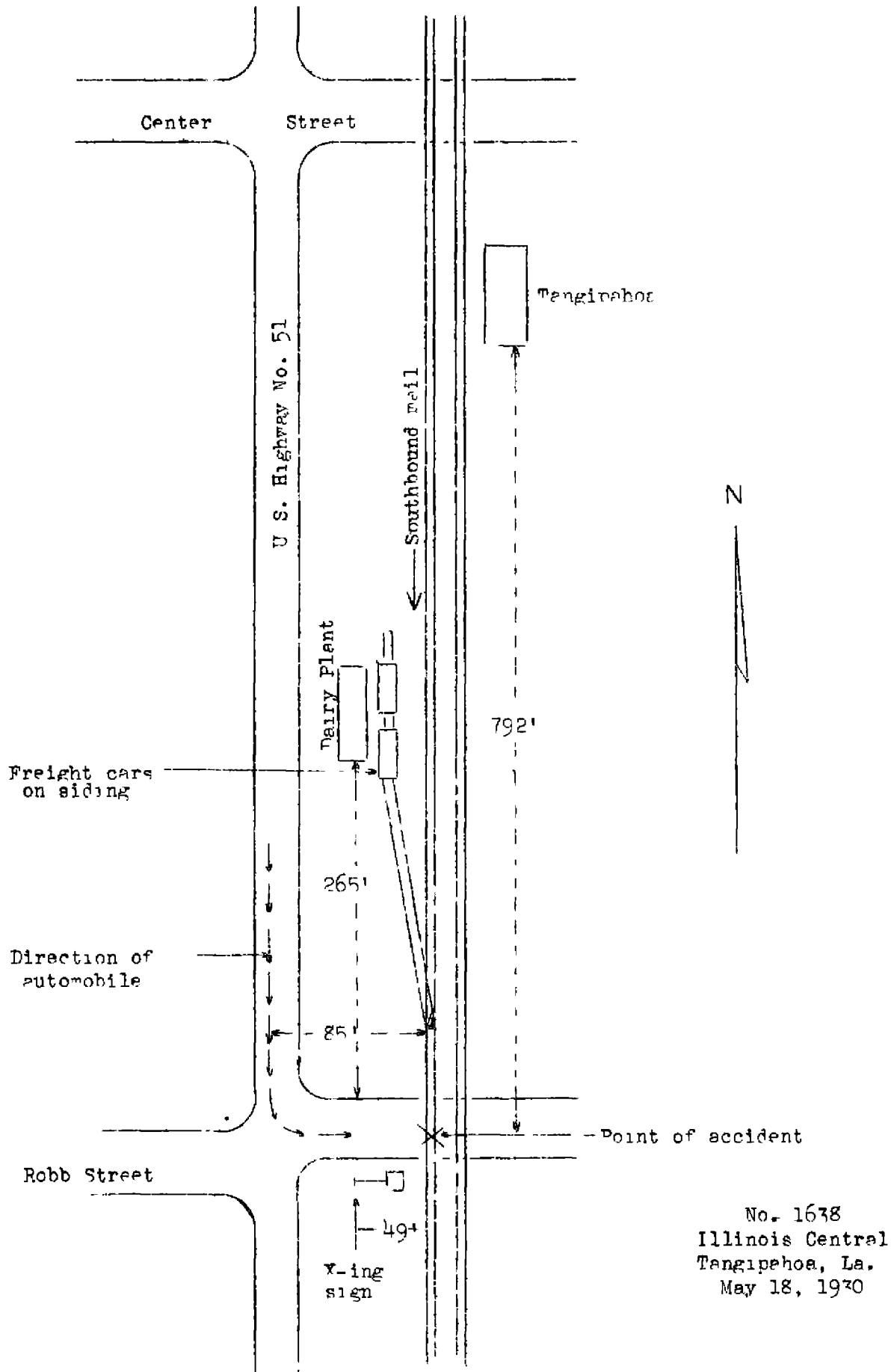
To the Commission:

On May 18, 1930, there was a derailment of a passenger train as a result of striking an automobile at a grade crossing on the Illinois Central Railroad at Tangipahoa, La., resulting in the death of the driver of the automobile and two employees, and the injury of four passengers.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the McComb District of the Louisiana Division, which extends between McComb, Miss., and Orleans Junction, La., a distance of 93.9 miles, and is a double-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The accident occurred at Robb Street crossing, which crosses the tracks at right angles at a point 792 feet south of the station. Approaching the point of accident from the north the track is tangent for more than 3 miles, this tangent extending for some distance beyond the crossing. The grade is practically level. U. S. Highway No. 51 parallels the tracks on the west and is 85 feet from the southbound main track at the point where the highway is intersected by Robb Street. There is a gradual ascent on Robb Street of about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet between the highway and the tracks, the latter being this much above the highway. Robb Street in the vicinity of the crossing is a gravel road; at the crossing there is a plank along the outside of each rail, and also one plank on the cage side of each rail, forming a flagway. The intervening spaces are filled with gravel.

There is a stub-end siding between the highway and main tracks north of the Robb Street crossing, which serves a dairy plant located 265 feet north of the crossing. The view had by a driver of an eastbound vehicle approaching this crossing on Robb Street is obstructed by the dairy plant, and on the day of the accident two refrigerator cars were standing on the siding at a point 251 feet north of the crossing. There is a warning sign on the right side of the street, 49 feet from the southbound track, painted white with red letters, reading "Louisiana Law Stop."



The weather was cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred at 7.35 a.m.

Description

Southbound passenger train No. 7 consisted of one combination baggage and club car, three Pullman sleeping cars, one dining car, one Pullman sleeping car, and one Pullman observation car, in the order named, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 1188, and was in charge of Conductor McLaurine and Engineer Ford. This train departed from McComb, 26.5 miles north of Tangipahoa, at 7.06 a.m., six minutes late, and was derailed when it struck an automobile at Robb Street while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 25 and 60 miles per hour.

The automobile involved was a Chevrolet coupe, owned by the Kentwood Motor Company, of Kentwood, La., and was being driven by J. P. Walls, Jr., a 14-year-old boy. This automobile came from the north on U. S. highway No. 51, turned left at Robb Street, and proceeded toward the crossing without stopping, and it had either stopped on the crossing or had just reached it when it was struck by train No. 7.

The automobile was demolished and came to rest upside down 25 feet south of the crossing and 20 feet west of the southbound main track. The engine, tender, and first four cars, of train No. 7, were derailed, the engine coming to rest in a badly-damaged condition on its left side, west of the track, at a point about 603 feet south of the crossing. The tender was turned completely around and laid on its left side between the engine and first car, which car remained in an upright position with its front end on the roadbed and its rear end down the bank. The following three cars leaned slightly toward the west; none of the remaining equipment was damaged. The employees killed were the engineer and fireman.

Summary of evidence

Conductor McLaurine stated that he was riding in the club portion of the first car of his train and on approaching the station at Tangipahoa he heard the engineer sound the whistle continuously until the time of the accident, sounding it repeatedly for the whistle board and crossings. After the accident, he went immediately to the engineer, who was fatally injured, and the engineer told him that the automobile was driven right in front of the engine and stopped, and that he just had time to apply the air brakes. Conductor McLaurine estimated the speed of his train to have been 50 miles per hour at

the time of the accident. He further stated that an air-brake test had been made before departing from McComb, and that after leaving McComb a running test of the air brakes was made.

Baggageman Bazin, who was riding in the front end of the first car, stated that approaching the station at Tangipahoa he heard the whistle signals sounded, and when just a short distance north of the station he felt the air brakes apply in emergency, at which time he estimated the speed of the train to have been between 50 and 60 miles per hour. He also stated that a running test of the air brakes was made upon leaving McComb. The statements of Flagman McCubbin, who was riding in the sixth car, corroborated those of the baggageman.

Mr. Bond, manager of the dairy plant at Tangipahoa, stated that he was working in the plant on the morning of the accident and heard a train whistle sounded and a terrific noise which sounded like an application of the brakes, this being when the train was about opposite the plant. He looked out of a south window and saw an automobile which appeared to be stalled on the crossing, with the front wheels between the rails of the southbound track; the train was then about 40 feet from the automobile and he saw the engine strike it. Mr. Bond also said that he uses this crossing many times a day, that it is rough, and one has to travel slowly over it.

Mr. Varnado stated that when he heard the train approaching he was sitting on the front steps of his home, located on the west side and facing U.S. Highway No. 51, and about 300 feet north of Robb Street crossing. He noticed the automobile just about the time it turned off the highway onto Robb Street and when he realized what was going to happen he ran out in his yard. The automobile approached the tracks at a very low rate of speed and came to a stop with the front wheels between the rails, and at that time the engine was about at the north end of the dairy plant. As the engine came out from behind the plant, he saw the engineman jump up and grab for something, and in a very short time the engine struck the car. Mr. Varnado said that he heard the whistle sounded several times, that the train approached at its usual speed, and that the speed had been reduced to 25 or 30 miles per hour at the time of the accident. Mr. Varnado further stated that he thought the driver of the automobile saw the train, became frightened, and lost control of his car.

Mr. Drott, a bus driver, was operating a bus northward on the highway at the time of the accident. He saw the automobile involved turn left onto Robb Street, but

did not pay particular attention to it as it approached the crossing until he heard a continuous blowing of the whistle of the train, and upon looking back after he crossed Robb Street it appeared to him that the driver had killed the motor while on the track and he saw the train strike the automobile. He saw a piece of ice flying in the air, and it was his opinion that the automobile had been driven slowly to keep the ice from falling off while crossing the tracks. He estimated the speed of the train at the time of the accident to have been 40 or 45 miles per hour.

Mr. Anderson, a farmer in the vicinity of Tangipahoa, stated that when the accident occurred he was standing in front of a garage located at the northwest corner of the highway and Robb Street. As the automobile approached the tracks it did not stop, and it appeared to him that the automobile and the train reached the crossing at about the same time. When he first saw the train, it was about 60 feet from the crossing and the automobile then was about 15 or 20 feet from the track. The driver was looking back at a piece of ice he was carrying on the bumper on the left side of the car, and Mr. Anderson said that he did not think the driver saw the approaching train. He further said that he did not hear any whistles sounded nor did he hear the train approach.

Mr. Forest, a farmer in the vicinity of Tangipahoa, who was also standing in front of the garage near the crossing, stated that he noticed an automobile approach the crossing and stop on the track about three seconds before it was struck by the train. He heard the train approaching and heard the whistle sounded, and when the automobile stopped on the track the train was about 20 or 30 feet from the crossing.

Division Engineer Chamley stated that he arrived at the scene of the accident a short time after its occurrence, and it appeared to him that when the engine struck the automobile the pilot on the engine was broken or loosened so that it came down and the nose struck a cross tie in the middle of the track which doubled the pilot under the engine derailing the engine truck. He further said that the crossing at Robb Street is infrequently used, as the bulk of traffic is over the main crossing known as Center Street, just north of the station.

Master Mechanic Chapman, who also arrived at the scene of the accident a short time after its occurrence, stated that he found parts of the engine pilot strewn along the track between the point of accident and where the engine lay; however, he was unable to tell whether or not small wooden parts of the pilot observed between

the crossing and the first marks of derailment had fallen from the pilot or had been picked up and thrown there by someone.

Inspection of the track showed that the first mark of derailment was on a tie 38 feet south of the crossing. This mark was on the gauge side of the east rail and nearly opposite this mark there were other marks showing that the flange of a wheel had run over the nuts of the angle-bar bolts on the outside of the west rail and then dropped onto the ties. These marks followed the rails to the frog of the crossover located 325 feet south of the crossing, and then the one on the east side of the track followed on the west side of the lead rail for some distance. Evidently only one pair of wheels was derailed until the west wheel was forced off the end of the ties. Parts of the pilot were strewn along the track, so it was likely that the impact with the automobile crushed the pilot, and that some part of it came in contact with and derailed the front pair of engine-truck wheels.

A vision test was made by sitting in the driver's seat of a Buick sedan several days after the occurrence of the accident, with the car stopped about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet west of the west rail, and it was observed that a train could have been seen approaching on the southbound track at Center Street, approximately 950 feet distant. When this test was made, two cars were on the siding near the dairy plant. The farther from the track, the less view one would have of an approaching train.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an automobile being driven on a grade crossing directly in front of an approaching train.

The Louisiana law requires that drivers of vehicles shall stop at a distance of not less than 10 feet nor more than 50 feet from the nearest railroad track. The evidence, however, indicates that the driver of the automobile was a 14-year-old boy and that apparently he was giving his attention to a piece of ice carried on the left back bumper of his automobile when approaching this crossing, and, while he was driving at a low rate of speed, he made no stop before reaching the crossing.

In view of the density of railroad traffic, averaging 37 trains daily, the hazardous condition created by the restricted vision had by the driver of a vehicle of a southbound train, and the fact that Robb Street crossing is used very little, the main crossing connecting

two U. S. highways being located at Center Street, about 950 feet north of Robb Street, it would appear that this crossing could be eliminated, the traffic diverted to Center Street, and proper protection provided at that crossing.

All of 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.

