

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE  
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE  
INTERNATIONAL-GREAT NORTHERN RAILROAD, MISSOURI PA-  
CIFIC LINES, AT TAYLOR, TEX , ON JANUARY 15, 1928.

March 21, 1928.

To the Commission:

On January 15, 1928, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the International-Great Northern Railroad, Missouri Pacific Lines, at Taylor, Tex., resulting in the death of two employees, and the injury of three other persons

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Austin District of the Palestine Division, extending between San Antonio and Taylor, Tex., a distance of 114.1 miles, this 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 at a crossover located within yard limits, at a point approximately 1 mile south of the station, the south switch of this crossover is a facing-point switch for northbound trains which leads off the main track through a No. 10 turnout to the right or east to a lead track which parallels the main track. Approaching the south crossover switch from either direction on the main track the track is tangent for a considerable distance. The grade is practically level, although south of Taylor there is a long ascending grade for southbound trains. For this reason it was customary for the crews of southbound freight trains, before leaving the yard, to arrange for the yardmaster to close the south crossover switch so that such trains would be able to start up the grade without reducing speed for the purpose of enabling some member of the crew to close the switch. The switch stand is located on the fireman's side of a northbound train, the switch stand mast is 5 feet  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height and on it there is mounted a target which is 15 inches square; this target is painted red and is displayed when the switch is open. There is also a switch lamp, 6 feet 8 inches above the top of the head block tie, at night this lamp displays a green indication when the switch is closed and a red indication when it is open. The view of the lamp is somewhat obscured by the switch stand of another switch, practically similar in character, located on the same side of the main track and 92 feet south thereof.

The weather was clear and it was twilight at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 6.03 p m.

### Description

Southbound freight train No. 67 consisted of 51 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1114, and was in charge of Conductor Berry and Engineman Vance. On this occasion the usual arrangements were made whereby the general yardmaster was to close the switch after the departure of this train from the yard, in order to enable the train to make a run for the hill. Train No. 67 departed from the yard at Taylor at 2.50 p. m , proceeded over the south lead track to the crossover, thence through the crossover to the main track and continued southward, leaving the switch open.

Northbound passenger train No. 4 consisted of two baggage cars, one mail car, one mail and baggage car, one coach, one chair car, one Pullman sleeping car, one dining car, and one business car, hauled by engine 1151, and was in charge of Conductor Williamson and Engineman Crewe. The third and fourth cars were of all-steel construction, the second car was of wooden construction, and the remainder were of steel-underframe construction. This train left Colorado Bridge, 34.8 miles south of Taylor and the last open office, at 5.12 p. m , according to the train sheet, 28 minutes late, and was derailed by the open switch at Taylor while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 35 and 40 miles per hour

The train passed through the crossover, not being derailed until it passed the north crossover switch, at which point engine 1151 and the first five cars were derailed. The engine and tender came to rest on their right sides, badly damaged, with the engine 442 feet north of the south crossover switch. The first two cars came to rest across the lead track and practically at right angles to it, the third car was diagonally across both the lead and the main tracks, while the fourth and fifth cars came to rest beyond and in line with the crossover. All of the derailed cars remained practically upright, the superstructures of the first, third and fourth cars sustained no damage of any consequence, but the second car, a wooden car, was demolished. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman

### Summary of evidence

Conductor Berry, of freight train No. 67, stated that the crossover switch was left open in accordance with the understanding he had with General Yardmaster Sinclair, who had agreed to close it so that the freight train could make a run for the hill. Conductor Berry said that similar arrangements were made with the yardmaster about 75 per cent of the time and that this had been the practice for 24 years to his knowledge. When no understanding was had with the yardmaster, however, or when the yardmaster did not tell crews to go

ahead and leave the switch open and that he would close it, then the switch would be closed by some member of the train crew after the freight train had headed out on the main track. Conductor Berry admitted that under the rules he was absolutely responsible for the position in which switches are left after having been used by him or his trainmen, except where switch tenders are stationed, but said he considered it a safe practice to leave the switch open as long as an understanding had been had with the yardmaster, an officer of the railroad, although he would not consider it safe to have such an understanding with an engine foreman, switchman, etc., in which latter event, in case an accident should occur, the conductor would be responsible. Subsequently, however, Conductor Berry accepted responsibility for leaving the switch open, under the rule holding conductors responsible for the position of switches used by members of their crews.

Engineman Vance, Fireman Shane, Head Brakeman Yates and Flagman Boyd, of freight train No. 67, stated that they were aware of the fact that Conductor Berry had arranged with Yardmaster Sinclair for the yardmaster to close the switch on the departure of their train. Head Brakeman Yates was the one who opened the switch and he said that he left the lock hanging in the staple, unlocked, with the key-way turned down. The statements of these employees were to the effect that the arrangement for the yardmaster to close the switch had been the practice for many years.

General Yardmaster Sinclair acknowledged that he agreed to close the switch after the departure of train No. 67. He did not close the switch immediately after the train departed, at about 2.50 p. m., but went back into the yard office, about 3,000 feet from the switch, and at 3.05 or 3.10 p. m. he left the office to take to their homes in his automobile the engine foreman and two helpers of the switch crew that went off duty in the yard at about 2.55 p. m. After taking these men to their homes he drove across the track at a highway crossing located about 35 car-lengths south of the switch, drove down a lane on the east side of the track, stopped about opposite the switch and then walked over to the switch and closed and locked it, at about 3.30 or 3.40 p. m., after which he returned to the yard office. Yardmaster Sinclair emphatically maintained that he closed the switch, and said that while he had no idea as to who might have opened it yet he had seen trespassers and children around the switch at different times. He did not learn of the accident until about 6.30 or 6.40 p. m., after its occurrence he observed that the switch was open and that there was nothing to indicate that any one had been tampering with the lock. He also talked to two of the members of the switch crew that went on duty in the yard at 3 p. m., Engine Foreman Short and Switchman Stevens, and was informed by them that they had gone around a cut of cars on yard track 1,

the first track east of the main track, about 15 minutes after Yardmaster Sinclair returned to the yard office from taking the members of the preceding switch crew to their homes, and he said Engine Foreman Short told him that while none of the members of the crew on duty at the time of the accident had noticed the switch lamp or target displaying a red indication, which would have shown that the switch was open, yet they felt that had a red indication been displayed they probably would have noticed it. Yardmaster Sinclair further stated that it had been the practice for years for the yardmaster to arrange with conductors to close the switch after the departure of a southbound train, the switch being closed from one-half hour to an hour or more afterwards, that while he had never spoken about this practice to any of the officials of the railroad yet it should have been known to them, and that no previous accident had occurred although the switch had been left open nearly every day under similar circumstances. He acknowledged, however, that it was a bad practice. Yardmaster Sinclair considered that he had complete authority over the movement of trains in and out of the yard and that when he informed Conductor Berry that he would close the switch he thereby relieved the conductor of all responsibility for the position of the switch.

Conductor Williamson, Flagman Kusa and Porter Gray, of train No. 4 were unaware of anything wrong until the air brakes were applied in emergency just prior to the accident. Their estimates of the speed of their train at the time of the accident ranged from 25 to 40 miles per hour. After the accident Conductor Williamson went forward and found Engineman Crewe and Fireman Bennett leaning against the stock pen fence, at this time they were still alive but the fireman would not speak. Conductor Williamson then inquired of Engineman Crewe as to the nature of the trouble and the engineman replied, "I did not see it." Conductor Williamson examined the switch and found it to be open, with the lever in the socket, the lock hanging in the staple, unlocked, and the switch lamp burning properly.

Engine Foreman Short, of the second switch crew, stated that they were switching on yard track 3, at a point about 2,500 feet west of the crossover, when Engineman Fortune told Switchman Stevens to cut off the switch engine, having noticed the red indication which showed that the switch was open. Foreman Short ran to the switch engine and cut it off from the three cars that were being switched, the idea being to run the switch engine down to the switch and to close it before train No. 4 arrived. Foreman Short then saw the headlight of train No. 4 and told Engineman Fortune to start sounding the whistle, at the same time running across to the main track and towards the approaching train, waving stop signals with his lighted white hand lantern, but he was still about 1,650 feet north of the switch when the accident

occurred Engine Foreman Short said that the crossover switch had not been used by his crew between the time they went on duty at 3 p. m. and the time of the accident, and that he had no reason to believe that the switch was open as no southbound train had departed after he went on duty. Engine Foreman Short could not recall definitely whether or not he told Yardmaster Sinclair after the accident that if a red indication had been displayed by the switch lamp it probably would have been noticed. Switchman Stevens said that while he did not remember having looked at the switch at the time he used another switch about 150 feet distant at about 4 15 p. m., yet he thought he would have noticed it had the switch been open at that time. The statements of other members of the switch crew brought out nothing additional of importance.

Various employees testified to the effect that it had been the practice for many years to arrange to leave the switch open on the departure of southbound freight trains, in order to make a run for the hill, and that it would be left open as much as an hour or more before being closed, while the practice was considered to be dangerous by those familiar with it, yet no one apparently took steps to have it abolished.

Tests were conducted which disclosed that under conditions similar to those existing at the time of the accident the indication displayed by the switch lamp could be seen from the engineman's side of the cab of a northbound engine for a distance of 1,960 feet, the indication was not wholly or plainly visible, however, until a point approximately 1,300 feet from the switch was reached, owing to interference from another switch lamp. It was also shown that on account of the construction of engine 1151, the view of the switch lamp was entirely obscured from the engineman's side of the cab after the engine had reached a point 553 feet from the switch.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch

In accordance with the usual practice prevailing at Taylor, Conductor Berry, of train No. 67, made an arrangement with Yardmaster Sinclair whereby the latter was to close the switch after the departure of train No. 67. Yardmaster Sinclair said he closed the switch at about 3.30 or 3.40 p. m., which was 40 or 50 minutes after the departure of train No. 67. The switch was not used between the time at which train No. 67 departed and the time at which the accident occurred, an interval of more than three hours, and when examined immediately after the occurrence of the accident it was found to be lined for the crossover with the lock hanging in the

staple, unlocked. There was no evidence to indicate that the switch had been tampered with, and since the switch and lock were found in the position in which they had been left by the crew of train No. 67, it is believed that Yardmaster Sinclair forgot to close and lock the switch, thus resulting in the occurrence of the accident.

Under the rules Conductor Berry is responsible for the position of switches used by members of his crew, and he acknowledged his responsibility. It is also provided in the rules that yardmasters are responsible for the proper position of their switches, and the same rule containing this provision has the further requirement that all main-track switches be set and locked for the main track. In view of this rule, and of the more or less general authority exercised by yardmasters over the territory subject to their jurisdiction, it is believed that under the arrangement Yardmaster Sinclair had made with Conductor Berry, which apparently was in line with a practice of many years standing, the yardmaster placed himself in the conductor's position, subjecting himself to the responsibility for closing the switch which should have been left with the conductor.

It is well recognized that unusual situations may exist in particular localities, making it desirable to deviate from the provisions of the rule book, such situations, however, should be taken care of by the issuance of special instructions pointing out the rule or rules to be modified and the extent of the modification, and making some one definitely responsible for what occurs, instead of allowing employees to make purely verbal arrangements among themselves to suit their own convenience. Under ordinary circumstances a large measure of responsibility for this accident would have rested upon the supervising officials of the operating department, due to recent changes, however, the officials under whose supervision this practice originated, and was allowed to exist, are no longer connected with the railroad, and those recently appointed can hardly be held responsible. It is incumbent upon them, however, to eliminate the conditions which led to the occurrence of this accident, not only at Taylor, but at other points where similar conditions may be found to exist.

General Yardmaster Sinclair had been employed as such since October, 1923, previous to which he had been employed in train service and as relief yardmaster for a period of about 19 years. The other 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