

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE LEHIGH VALLEY RAILROAD AT ALDENE, N.J., ON NOVEMBER 11, 1924.

November 26, 1924.

To the Commission:

On November 11, 1924, there was a rear-end collision between two freight trains on the Lehigh Valley Railroad at Aldene, N. J., which resulted in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the New York Division, which extends between Jersey City and New Market, N.J., a distance of 38.1 miles, and is a double-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders and an automatic block-signal system. The point of accident was 350 feet west of the station at Aldene; approaching this point from the west the track is tangent a distance of 7 miles, while the grade is ascending for a considerable distance, being 0.24 per cent ascending at the point of accident.

The automatic signals are of the one-arm, three-position, upper-quadrant type, displaying red, yellow and green, for stop, caution and proceed, respectively. The signals light on the approach of a train, first displaying a red indication, and remaining at red in case the block is occupied or else changing immediately to yellow if second block in advance is occupied or green if the second block in advance is clear. Signals 182 and 183, of the type above described, are located 12,312 feet and 4,910 feet, respectively, west of the point of accident.

The weather was dark and misty at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 4.40 a.m.

Description

Eastbound freight train symbol MJ-2, consisted of 62 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 741, and was in charge of Conductor Gaumer and Engineman Oswald. It left South Plainfield, N.J., 9.4 miles from Aldene, at 3.50 a.m., passed Potter, 6.1 miles from Aldene, at 4.14 a.m., and was ascending the long grade in the vicinity of the point of accident at a speed estimated by the crew to have been about 10 miles an hour when the rear of the train was struck by train SJ-4.

Eastbound freight train symbol SJ-4 consisted of 37 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1643 and was in charge of Conductor Daniels and Engineman Walck. It passed South Plainfield at 4.25 a.m., Potter at 4.31 a.m., passed signal 182 in the caution position and signal 182 in the stop position, and collided with the rear end of train MJ-2, while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 14 and 40 miles an hour.

The caboose of train MJ-2 was badly damaged, as was the car immediately ahead of it, while the next two cars were derailed. Engine 1643 was derailed but remained upright and was not seriously damaged; none of the cars in this train was derailed or damaged. The employee killed was the flagman of train MJ-2.

Summary of evidence.

All of the members of the crew of train MJ-2 were riding on the engine with the exception of the flagman, and their statements were to the effect that the signals had operated properly as the train approached them. Conductor Gaumer last saw the flagman at South Plainfield, this being when the flagman was going back to flag. Conductor Gaumer said he had had this flagman for a period of about three months and that it was the flagman's custom to throw off a fusee when the train was running at a low rate of speed, he did not think, however, that the weather conditions in the vicinity of the point of accident were such as to require the flagman to throw off a fusee on this occasion, saying that he could see about a train length. The statements of the other members of the crew of this train brought out no additional facts of importance.

Engineman Walck, of train SJ-4, said the rear cab door of the engine had been open, this being an engine of double-cab type, and it was possible that while trying to close this door he passed signal 182 without observing its indication although he said he whistled for the road crossing which is within 250 feet of the signal. His impression was that this signal was displaying a clear indication but his statements indicate that he was not positive concerning its indication. Engineman Walck was not successful in closing the cab door and on account of being chilled as a result of his clothes having been wet he turned around so that his back was against the boiler and passed signal 182 without observing its indication, although here again he said he whistled for road crossings, which in this instance were located 3,900 feet west of the signal.

the speed of his train was about 45 or 50 miles an hour when he looked ahead and saw the markers on the rear of train MJ-3, about 15 car lengths distant; he at once applied the air brakes in emergency and thought he had reduced the speed to about 15 or 18 miles an hour at the time of the accident. He did not see anything of the flagman of train MJ-2. Engineman Walck further stated that although the weather was a little misty he could have seen the markers of train MJ-2 for a greater distance had he been looking ahead.

Fireman Mahler and Head Brakeman O'Brien were riding on the tender. Their statements were to the effect that they had not seen any of the signal indications and that the speed was about 40 or 45 miles an hour when the air brakes were applied just before the occurrence of the accident. Fireman Mahler also said that shortly after the accident Engineman Walck told him he was thinking that signal 182 had displayed a clear indication and that when he again looked for signals he saw the rear end of the train ahead and thought he must have missed signal 182 entirely. The statements of Conductor Daniels and Flagman Sittler, who were riding in the caboose of train SJ-4, brought out no additional facts of importance.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Walck, of train SJ-4, properly to observe and obey signal indications.

Engineman Walck's statements show that he failed entirely to observe the indication of signal 182, the last signal passed by his train prior to the accident, and that he had only an impression in his mind as to the indication displayed by signal 182. He said he was engaged in trying to close the cab door when in the vicinity of signal 182, while after passing that signal he turned around with his back to the boiler and did not realize there was anything wrong until he looked ahead and saw the markers on the rear of train MJ-2. His statements indicate that the weather conditions were not such as to interfere materially with the visibility of signals and it seems clearly apparent that had he been maintaining the proper lookout he would have been able to observe the signal indications in ample time to have prevented the occurrence of the accident.

No information was obtained from Flagman Billman, of train MJ-2, prior to his death. His train had been moving at a low rate of speed for some distance, but under the circumstances there is no assurance that the accident would have been prevented had he thrown off a fusee.

An adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented the occurrence of this accident.

The employees involved were experienced men. At the time of the accident the crew of train MJ-2 had been on duty nearly 9 hours and the crew of train SJ-4, about 5 hours, previous to which they had been off duty 15 hours or more.

Respectfully submitted,

W. F. BORLAND,

Director.