

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 NEAR GENEVA JUNCTION,
N.Y., ON OCTOBER 5, 1925.

January 14, 1926.

To the Commission:

On October 5, 1925, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the Lehigh Valley Railroad near Geneva Junction, N.Y., as a result of a collision with an automobile at a crossing ^{at grade} resulting in the death of two travelers on the highway and the injury of one traveler on the highway.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Ithaca Branch of the Seneca Division, extending between Van Etten Junction and Geneva Junction, N.Y., a distance of 59.5 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The accident occurred at a public state-highway crossing, which crosses the railroad track almost at right angles at a point about 2,000 feet east of Geneva Junction, the railroad track extending from west to east and the highway from north to south. The track is tangent for a considerable distance in either direction, while the grade for westbound trains is about 1 per cent descending.

Approaching the railroad from the south on the highway the view of the track toward the east or right is practically unobstructed; the highway, however, curves to the left just before it crosses the track. There is a state highway crossing sign on the east side of the highway 335 feet from the track, reading "DANGER! R.R. 300 FT AHEAD". Double lines are painted across the highway with letters "R.R." at a point 300 feet from the track, and 200 feet south of the track there is another sign painted across the highway, followed by other painted diagonal marks, while at a point 50 feet south of the track and also on the east side of the highway is located a standard railroad crossing warning reading "RAILROAD CROSSING LOOK OUT FOR THE CARS". The crossing, however, is not protected by watchman or gates, nor any form of automatic signals to warn travelers on the highway of the approach of trains. At a point about 250 feet south of the track a dirt road leads off the

highway toward the northeast and crosses the railroad track at a point 325 feet east of where the state highway crosses it; a standard railroad crossing disk marked "R.R." is located on the east side of the dirt road at a point 225 feet south of the track, and this disk can also be seen by the driver of a northbound automobile traveling on the main highway.

The weather was clear and it was dusk at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 6.27 p.m.

Description

Westbound passenger train No. 9 consisted of one combination baggage and mail car, one combination coach, two Pullman cars, one smoking car, two coaches, one Pullman car, one dining car, and three Pullman cars, in the order named, hauled by engine 2057, and was in charge of Conductor Baldwin and Engineer Callan. This train passed Van Etten Junction at 5.10 p.m., 52 minutes late, and on reaching the highway crossing, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 40 and 45 miles an hour the left side of the engine was struck by an automobile at the gangway between the engine and tender.

The automobile involved, a Ford touring car, occupied by three State troopers, being driven by State Trooper Brockman, was proceeding north on the state highway. It passed a northbound automobile, which was standing on the dirt road, south of the track and just into clear of the highway, waiting for the train to pass, and struck the engine of train No. 9 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 30 or 35 miles an hour.

The automobile was demolished and the force of the impact broke off the step at the gangway between the engine and tender on the left side, while one pair of the rear tender-truck wheels was derailed at a point 40 feet west of the crossing. In this condition the train traveled about 2,203 feet, at which point the rear tender truck became entirely detached and the first four cars in the train were derailed; these cars, however, remained practically upright. The persons killed were the two State troopers who were riding in the automobile with State Trooper Brockman.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Rommell stated that when his train was approaching the highway crossing he was sitting on his seat box looking ahead to observe signals. He glanced to the left when the engine was about 100 or 150 feet

from the crossing and saw the automobile approaching the crossing from the south at about the same rate of speed the train was traveling, the automobile continuing and running into the left side of the engine. Immediately after the accident he jumped off his seat box, crossed over in the cab and informed the engineman of what had happened, whereupon the engineman applied the air brakes. Fireman Rommell said that the engine whistle had been sounded for the crossing and that the engine headlight was burning brightly, as was also the case with the headlights of the automobile.

Engineman Callan stated that he made an air-brake application about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile east of the crossing and released the brakes just before reaching the crossing, preparatory to further reducing the speed through Geneva Junction; the whistle was sounded for the crossing when about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile east of it, and the automatic engine bell was ringing and the headlight burning brightly. When Fireman Rommell came across the cab and informed him of the accident the engine was between the crossing and the bridge spanning Seneca River, the east end of this bridge being 1,100 feet west of the crossing, and he at once made a full service air brake application, deeming it unnecessary to make an emergency application on account of the resultant shock and not knowing at this time that any part of the train had been derailed.

Conductor Baldwin stated that on his arrival at the head end of the engine after the accident the headlight was burning and the automatic engine bell still ringing; he also said that the engine whistle had been sounded for the crossing and that all the cars in the train were lighted. The testimony of the other members of the crew brought out nothing additional of importance in connection with the accident.

Mr. Fred A. Hartrauft, a merchant of Geneva, who was an eyewitness to the accident, stated that he was taking his family for an automobile ride on the day of the accident. On crossing the main line of the Lehigh Valley railroad, this crossing being located about 1,200 feet south of the crossing on the Ithaca Branch where the accident occurred, his wife and boy saw the train approaching. Mr. Hartrauft continued northward and brought his automobile to a stop south of the Ithaca Branch crossing on the dirt road, just clear of the main highway, to wait for the train to pass. Shortly afterwards the Ford touring car occupied by the State troopers passed him at a speed of about 30 or 35 miles an hour, and ran into the side of the passenger train. Mr. Hartrauft said that at the time the State troopers passed he remarked to his wife, "Can't those fellows see that

train coming there." He further stated that the engine whistle was sounded for the crossing, the headlight on the engine was burning brightly, and the cars in the train were lighted; also that there was a southbound automobile standing on the north side of the crossing waiting for the train to pass.

State Trooper Brockman, the operator of the automobile involved in the accident, was interviewed but he said he could not recall anything as to how the accident occurred. He remembered having passed over the main line crossing but did not recall noticing the approaching train or striking it at the Ithaca Branch crossing. He also said that approaching the crossing the speed of his automobile was about 30 or 35 miles an hour. State Trooper Brockman admitted having driven his automobile through the crossing gates of another railroad on the preceding day, at Waterloo, N.Y., stating that in that instance he was endeavoring to overtake a party ahead who had been reported as having committed a theft, and that the crossing gates were lowered just as he was about to cross, at a speed above the average.

A check of automobile travel over the Ithaca Branch crossing between the hours of 10 and 11 a.m., October 12, disclosed that 220 automobiles passed over it within that period. Out of this number about 60 per cent were traveling at speeds varying between 35 and 45 miles an hour, and did not slow down on approaching or passing over the railroad track. In three instances drivers overtook and passed the automobile head while actually on the railroad track, and in other instances they passed automobiles at the point on the highway where the automobile was standing waiting for the train to pass on the day of the accident. Five passenger trains and one freight train, in each direction, pass over this crossing during a 24 hour period.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the driver of an automobile running into the side of a passenger train at a highway grade crossing.

The investigation established that as the train approached this crossing the automatic engine bell was ringing, the engine whistle was sounded, the headlight on the engine was burning brightly, and the cars in the train were lighted. It also appeared that a practically unobstructed view could be had of the approaching train, and that two other automobiles, one northbound and one

southbound, had stopped for the purpose of allowing the train to pass. Had the driver of the automobile involved exercised proper care approaching the crossing this accident would not have occurred.

This crossing is not protected by a watchman, gates or automatic signal devices to indicate the approach of trains. As there is a large amount of travel over this crossing it is believed that some form of protection for highway traffic, in addition to that afforded by the crossing signs and painted lines across the highway, is required, although in this particular case there is no assurance that such additional safeguards would not also have been disregarded.

All of the railroad employees involved were experienced men; 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.