

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE TRACKS OF THE LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD AND THE ATLANTA & SAINT ANDREWS BAY RAILWAY AT COTTONDALE, FLA., ON SEPTEMBER 16, 1923.

October 17, 1923.

To the Commission:

On September 16, 1923, there was a side collision between two passenger trains at the intersection of the tracks of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and the Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay Railway at Cottondale, Fla., which resulted in the death of 3 passengers, and the injury of 43 passengers and 2 employees.

Location and method of operation.

At the point of accident both railroads are single-track lines over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. Approaching the point of accident from the west on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, the track is tangent for nearly 10 miles; the grade is descending for approximately 5,000 feet, varying from 0.20 to 0.62 per cent, and is then level for 272 feet to the point of accident. At a point 5,303 feet from the crossing there is a sign board which reads "1 mile to A. & St. A. B. crossing"; the station whistle board and a stop sign are located 1,747 and 106 feet respectively from the crossing. Trees on either side of the Louisville and Nashville right of way interfere with the view of the Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay track on either side of the crossing when a Louisville & Nashville train is some distance from the crossing, but the view of the crossing itself is unobscured. The track of the Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay Railway crosses the Louisville & Nashville Railroad at right angles, the intersection being directly at the passenger station, which is used by both roads, and is located northeast of the intersection. The crossing is not protected by any form of signal or interlocking device, movements of trains over it being governed by a special time-table rule of both roads which requires all trains to come to a full stop and know that the track is clear before crossing. It is also required by law that trains stop before passing over crossings.

The station platform at Cottondale is equipped with six oil lights on the side of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and two on the side of the Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay Railway. These lights had been cleaned and filled with

oil and were burning at the time of the accident, they are about 11 feet 10 inches above the rails. There is no semaphore or train order signal of any kind at the passenger station.

It was dark and partially cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred between 10:45 and 10:58 p. m.

Description.

Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay northbound passenger train No. 6 consisted of one combination baggage and passenger car and seven coaches, all of wooden construction, hauled by engine 102, and was in charge of Conductor Pilcher and Engineman Scott. This train left Panama City, 52.28 miles south of Cottondale, and the last open telegraph office, at 7:25 p. m., 25 minutes late. No time of its arrival at Cottondale is shown on the train sheet on account of Cottondale being a closed office, but according to the statement of Conductor Pilcher it arrived at Cottondale at 10:55 p. m. and had been standing at the station about 3 or 4 minutes, with the seventh car on the crossing, when it was struck by Louisville & Nashville passenger train No. 1.

Louisville & Nashville passenger train No. 1, southbound according to time-table direction, consisted of one express car, one combination mail and baggage car, two coaches and two Pullman sleeping cars, hauled by engine 165, and was in charge of Conductor White and Engineman Boghich. This train left Chipley, 9.42 miles from Cottondale, and the last open telegraph office, at 10:24 p. m., four minutes late, and at 10:45 p. m., according to the testimony of the train and engine crew, ran through Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay train No. 6 at Cottondale while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 5 and 25 miles an hour.

The seventh car of train No. 6 was cut in two and damaged to the extent that it was subsequently destroyed. No other equipment in this train was derailed, and the track was not damaged. The Louisville & Nashville train remained intact and came to a stop with the rear end of the fourth car on the crossing, engine 165 sustained only slight damage, and engine and equipment continued in service to the end of the run.

Summary of evidence.

Conductor Pilcher, of train No. 6, stated that upon the arrival of that train at Cottondale, he looked at his watch and noted that it was then 10:55 p. m.; he said that because of the length of the train and in order that as many of the passengers as possible would be able to use the station platform when alighting from the train, it was brought to a

stop with the engine, baggage car and a portion of the first passenger coach north of the station, the other coaches being opposite the station with the exception of the last two coaches, the seventh being over the crossing and the last below the crossing. According to his statement the train had been standing in this position about three or four minutes when it was struck by Louisville & Nashville train No. 1. He also stated that with the exception of the last coach, which was lighted with oil lamps, the other coaches were lighted with 6 or 12 twenty-five watt electric light globes, which were burning brightly at the time of the accident.

Engineman Scott, of train No. 6, corroborated the statements of Conductor Pulcher as to the time of arrival of train No. 6 at Cottondale and he also estimated the duration of the stop to have been approximately 3 or 4 minutes. As he had compared the time of his watch with a standard clock at Panama City, he was positive in his statement that the accident occurred at 10:58 or 10:59 p. m.

Engineman Boghich, of Louisville & Nashville train No. 1, stated that the usual terminal air-brake test was made at Pensacola and the inspectors reported that the brakes were in good order. At Milligan, 80 miles from Cottondale, trouble developed with the headlight, making it necessary to exchange the bulb in the headlight twice, the last bulb being taken from one of the coaches. Shortly after leaving Chipley the headlight began to flicker but did not go completely out. Approaching Cottondale he said he shut off steam at the mile board and drifted to the station board, which he passed at a speed of about 25 miles an hour, sounded the usual station signal and made a light application of the air brakes. After running about 7 or 8 car lengths with the brakes applied he became temporarily lost, not being able to see the station lights, and decided that he had made a mistake in the distance and released the brakes, after traveling about a car length he discovered that his view of the station was cut off by a train on the crossing and he immediately applied the brakes in emergency, reversed the engine, called to the fireman and jumped, at which time the engine was only a coach length from the crossing, traveling at a speed of about 10 miles an hour. Prior to this he had not seen the lights of the train on the crossing. Engineman Boghich further stated that he understood and knew of the rule requiring trains to come to a full stop at the crossing at Cottondale, and attributes his failure to stop on this occasion to his being temporarily lost, due to the defective headlight on his engine, and to not seeing the station lights or those of the train on the crossing. He also said there was nothing on the engine, track or right of way, that in any way obstructed his view and that the air brakes were working properly. The statements of Fireman Jones, colored, practically corroborated those of Engineman Boghich and added nothing of importance to the evidence.

Conductor White, of Louisville & Nashville train No. 1, stated that at Milligan he was informed that the headlight had failed and that a bulb from one of the coaches was being used, he said the usual run was made and nothing out of the ordinary occurred; the train left Chipley at 10:34 p. m., four minutes late, took coal and water after leaving the station, and according to his statement, arrived at Cottondale at 10:45 p. m., on time, at which time he said the accident occurred; he was positive that this was the correct time as he looked at his watch immediately after the collision. Approaching Cottondale, Conductor White said he heard the station whistle sounded at about the usual place, at which time he thought the speed of the train was about 50 miles an hour. Almost immediately after the station whistle was sounded there was a light application of the air brakes and very shortly afterwards he felt the air brakes applied in emergency, and upon looking out he saw the train on the crossing, at which time his train was moving at a speed of about 20 miles an hour. Estimates of the employees as to the speed when the station whistle was sounded varied from 35 to 45 miles an hour, and practically all of them said the emergency application came very shortly before the collision. After the accident an inspection of the air brakes failed to disclose anything wrong and the train departed from Cottondale at 1:48 a. m., running without a headlight. Engineman Mills, who was deadheading on the train, took charge of the engine from Cottondale to River Junction, and stated that no trouble was experienced in making the various stops en route.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by the failure of Louisville & Nashville train No. 1 to stop at the crossing at grade, for which Engineman Boghich is responsible.

While conflicting in many details, the evidence indicates that train No. 1 approached Cottondale at a much higher rate of speed than that estimated by Engineman Boghich, and judging from his statements it must have been close to the stop board when the brakes were released; very shortly afterwards he saw the train on the crossing and applied the air brakes in emergency, but it was then too late to stop the train. Engineman Boghich knew when his train passed the crossing sign board and also the station whistle board, and it is difficult to understand why he failed to have his train under such control as to be able to stop at the stop board. The fact that he had been having trouble with the headlight made it necessary that he use even more than ordinary caution when approaching this crossing, and had he done so, undoubtedly he could have determined his location and would have been able to stop his train in time to prevent the accident.

Each of the two roads using this crossing operates two first-class trains daily in each direction, while on week days the Louisville & Nashville Railroad operates two second-class trains and the Atlanta & Saint Andrews Bay Railway one second-class train, in each direction. As previously stated, there is no form of crossing protection at this point, had an interlocking plant or some form of train control been in use, this accident would have been prevented.

Engineman Boghich had had about 33 years' service, none of the employees involved had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.