

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE  
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE  
LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD NEAR FOUNTAIN HEAD,  
TENN., ON NOVEMBER 16, 1926.

December 21, 1926.

To the Commission:

On November 16, 1926, there was a head-end collision between two maintenance of way motor cars on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad near Fountain Head, Tenn., which resulted in the death of 5 employees and the injury of 14 employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Nashville Division extending between Nashville, Tenn., and Bowling Green, Ky., a distance of 73.03 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. Motor cars, however, are operated only by the rules governing maintenance of way employees. The accident occurred in a cut at a point 3,782 feet north of the north passing-track switch at Fountain Head, approaching this point in either direction the track is tangent for a considerable distance. The grade is 1.27 per cent ascending for northbound trains to within about 800 feet of the point of accident from which point it begins to taper off, the accident occurring at the top of the grade on practically level track. Approaching from the north the grade is level for a distance of 1,303 feet to the point of accident.

It was clear and the moon was shining at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 8.45 p.m.

Description

Southbound section motor car No. 33 was in charge of Foreman Ashworth, with a crew of nine laborers. This motor car departed from Mitchellville, 6.23 miles north of Fountain Head, en route to the scene of an accident that had occurred at Hendersonville, Tenn., 23.94 miles south of Fountain Head, and was proceeding southward at an estimated speed of 20 to 35 miles an hour when it collided with northbound motor car No. 40.

Northbound section motor car No. 40 was in charge of Foreman Hindman, also with a crew of nine laborers. Foreman Hindman, who was stationed at Fountain Head, also had orders to proceed to Hendersonville, but at the time of the accident was proceeding northward for the purpose of obtaining additional men at Portland, 2.4 miles north of Fountain Head, and the motor car was traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 15 to 25 miles an hour when it collided with motor car No. 33.

The motor cars were derailed and came to rest at a point 77 feet south of the point of collision, considerably damaged. They were both derailed but remained partly on the roadbed. All the employees on both motor cars were killed or injured, the foreman of the Mitchellville crew being among those killed.

#### Summary of evidence

Track Supervisor Watkins, who was at Gallatin, 11.87 miles south of Fountain Head, at the time of the accident at Hendersonville, stated that upon being notified of that accident he immediately instructed the two section crews at Gallatin to proceed to the scene of the accident on their motor cars and then sent instructions to Foreman Hindman at Fountain Head and Foreman Ashworth at Mitchellville to get their men together, board the wreck train from Louisville, and accompany it to Hendersonville, nothing being said about using their motor cars. He then proceeded direct to Hendersonville, at which point he was informed of the motor car collision, he did not know why Foreman Hindman was traveling northward at the time. Supervisor Watkins said it was customary when starting over the road with motor cars to get a line up on trains from the dispatcher, and also to flag around all curves and other dangerous places, but there was no protection afforded against other motor cars except as provided in the maintenance of way rules. He thought the operators of the motor cars could have observed each other's approach when about 750 feet apart if standard trainmen's lanterns had been lighted and placed at the head end of each car. He also stated that the speed limit for motor cars was 20 miles per hour and was of the impression that had Foreman Ashworth's car been operated under control the accident would have been averted. As contrasted with the idea of Supervisor Watkins, however, the opinion was advanced by Roadmaster Wendling that the accident would not have been prevented even had the motor cars been equipped with spot lights.

Dispatcher Overton stated that when he learned of the accident at Hendersonville he called the wreck train and also called several section crews north of that point, he did not, however, call either the Fountain Head or Mitchellville crews. Foreman Ashworth, at Mitchellville, later informed him by telephone that he had instructions to go to Hendersonville on the Louisville wreck train and asked the dispatcher if he should wait for the wreck train or proceed to Hendersonville by motor car. Upon inquiry the chief dispatcher instructed him to notify Foreman Ashworth to proceed on his motor car, in order to save time, and at the same time he told the section foreman that there were no trains between Mitchellville and Hendersonville. Dispatcher Overton did not recall having talked with Foreman Hindman by telephone and was quite certain that if he had done so he would have remembered it.

Section Foreman Hindman stated that about 7 p.m. he was notified through a merchant at Fountain Head, who had been reached on the telephone by Supervisor Watkins, to get his men together and go to Hendersonville on the Louisville wreck train. Foreman Hindman then went to the telephone to talk with the dispatcher who informed him that the wreck train left Louisville about 7 p.m., but that he could not say as to the time at which it would arrive at Fountain Head; the dispatcher then instructed him to proceed to Hendersonville on his motor car. Being somewhat in doubt as to the original instructions he again conferred with the merchant and was informed that the merchant's instructions were to notify him to wait for the wreck train. Supposing that there was some misunderstanding, Foreman Hindman then decided to proceed north to Portland for the purpose of getting more information and additional men, but stated he did not get authority from any one to make such a movement as at the time he talked with the dispatcher he was told there was nothing close, there was nothing said about another motor car, and he considered that he was making the movement according to the rules, there being nothing to prevent him from moving in either direction. Foreman Hindman said the first he saw of Foreman Ashworth's car was when an object appeared on the track a few feet ahead of him, he immediately applied the brakes, at which time his car was traveling at a speed of about 20 miles an hour, and had reduced the speed to about 10 miles an hour when the collision occurred. In his opinion he could have stopped his car in an additional 30 feet. Foreman Hindman further stated that the opposing motor car was running without lights, but that his own car was protected on each end by red and white lights.

Section Laborer Hall stated that he accompanied Foreman Hindman from the merchant's store to the tool house and while at that point a motor car passed going south. He said the foreman told the men to place their motor car on the track and that they were going to Portland for information and some more men. Laborer Hall further stated that his car had red and white lights in front and a red light at the rear, but he did not see any light on Foreman Ashworth's car. He saw the approaching car just in time to jump before the collision occurred, he estimated the speed of his own car at the time of the collision at 25 miles an hour, but could not estimate the speed of the opposing car.

Section Laborer Buntin stated that when informed of the wreck at Hendersonville, Foreman Ashworth advised him they would go by train. After taking their tools to the station and waiting at that point about 15 minutes, Apprentice Foreman Durham went to the telephone booth and called the dispatcher, and when he returned he informed them they were to proceed to Hendersonville on their motor car. On their way south they stopped at Portland and the foreman was given a clear track to Hendersonville on everything except motor cars. Laborer Buntin said that at the time they left Portland they had red and white lights on the front and a red light on the rear of their car, but he did not know whether these lights were still burning at the time of the collision. He further stated that their car was traveling at a speed of about 35 miles an hour and that he just got a glimpse of a light on the northbound motor car immediately before the collision occurred.

Section Laborers Adams and Branhan, who were riding on Foreman Ashworth's car, practically corroborated the statements of Laborer Buntin, except that they did not see any lights on the approaching northbound car.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by the poor judgment exercised by Section Foreman Hindman in moving his car northward toward Portland when the only instructions he had received required him to proceed southward to Hendersonville and by the failure of Section Foreman Ashworth to operate his car within the prescribed speed limit.

It appeared from the testimony that Section Foreman Hindman of Fountain Head and Section Foreman Ashworth of Mitchellville had been instructed by Supervisor Watkins to get their crews together and wait for a wreck train that was en route from Louisville, and upon arrival of the train at their respective stations they were to accompany it to the scene of an accident at Hendersonville. Subsequently the section foreman at Mitchellville communicated with the dispatcher and was instructed to proceed to Hendersonville by motor car, the latter instructions were being complied with at the time of the collision. The section foreman at Fountain Head stated that he also communicated with the dispatcher and received similar instructions, and while this statement could not be verified by any one connected with the dispatchers' office yet there was other evidence which indicated that such instructions might have been received by him. The evidence also indicated that Foreman Hindman was somewhat in doubt as to just what move to make and at the time of the accident he was traveling away from instead of toward the accident at Hendersonville, which he said was for the purpose of going to Portland, an open office, for more information and also for additional men, although at that time his motor car contained the maximum number of men permitted by the rules, and there was only one man to be obtained at Portland. All the instructions he had received related to moving southward to Hendersonville and he should have had in mind the fact that other section foreman north of Fountain Head might have received similar instructions and that a movement northbound would be attended with more than the usual danger.

The evidence indicated that at the time of the collision the motor car of Section Foreman Ashworth was traveling at a speed greatly in excess of 20 miles an hour, the maximum speed prescribed by the rules governing the operation of motor cars, in fact, although considerably lighter, yet it drove Section Foreman Hindman's car backward a distance of nearly 80 feet. Had Section Foreman Ashworth been operating his car under proper control the accident probably would not have resulted so seriously.

It could not be definitely established whether both cars were equipped with the required lights at the time of the collision, as the evidence was very conflicting in this respect. The occupants of each car stated their car was equipped with lights, but all of them, except one, stated they did not see any lights on the opposing car.

The operation of motor cars on this railroad is governed by the rules of the Maintenance of Way Department. Among other requirements these rules impose a maximum speed limit of 20 miles per hour, require curves, tunnels, and other dangerous places to be flagged, and specify that one white light and two red lights shall be carried at night, the white light to be displayed at the head end of the motor car and one red light at the rear end. It is also required that motor cars shall be operated at all times so that they can be stopped within one-half the range of vision. Strict interpretation of the last rule would make it impossible to operate motor cars at night except at an extremely low rate of speed. The increasing use of power-operated cars for the transportation of workmen in the various departments of a railroad, resulting in the transportation of larger numbers of men at much higher rates of speed than formerly was the case with hand-operated cars, raises the question as to whether there should not be more stringent rules governing their operation. It might be impracticable to handle all of such movements by train-order authority, and undoubtedly a section foreman in general should have the right to move where he pleases on his own section so far as opposing motor cars are concerned. But when an emergency arises which requires section men to leave their own particular section and proceed to some other section, perhaps 40 or 50 miles distant, then it is a question whether movements over such other sections should be made only by train-order authority. Accidents of the type covered by this investigation are not of frequent occurrence, but the seriousness of this particular accident fully warrants such steps as can be taken to prevent the occurrence of other accidents of a similar nature.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,  
Director.