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 AT MOBILE, ALA., ON DECEMBER 16, 1926.

January 22, 1927.

To the Commission:

On December 16, 1926, there was a side collision between a passenger train and a light engine on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad at Mobile, Ala., resulting in the death of two employees and the injury of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the New Orleans and Mobile Division, which extends between New Orleans, La., and Mobile, Ala., a distance of 140.36 miles; at the point of accident this is a double-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 point 3,312 feet south of the passenger station at Mobile and 476 feet north of the south end of double track, within yard limits, at a trailing-point crossover connecting the two main tracks, approaching the point of accident from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 2,298 feet, followed by a 2° 45' curve to the left 394 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 208 feet from its southern end. The grade is level.

At a point about 15 feet south of the south crossover switch there is a switch leading to what is known as the outbound engine track, which extends from the southbound main track toward the west. The switch stand at the north crossover switch is of the New Century ground-throw type, and it is located on the west or fireman's side of the northbound track, night indications are green when the switch is lined for the main track and red when it is lined for the crossover.

At the time of the accident switch engine 759 and some cars were standing south of the crossover on what is known as track 1, which is practically a continuation of the southbound main track, and on this account the view of the approaching northbound train had by the engineman of the light engine while standing on the crossover clear of the northbound track was restricted to approximately 550 feet.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 1.25 a. m.

Description

Light engine 235, of the 4-6-2 type, headed north, was in charge of Engineman Crowe, it departed from the outbound engine track at about 1.20 a. m., enroute to the passenger station at Mobile, and was brought to a stop on the crossover with its head end clear of the northbound main track. Shortly afterwards it proceeded and after moving a few feet, causing it to foul the northbound main track, it was struck by train No. 2.

Northbound passenger train No. 2 consisted of one express car, one baggage car, one combination coach, one coach, and five sleeping cars, hauled by engine 178, and was in charge of Conductor Franco and Engineman Still. All the cars were of steel construction with the exception of the second car, which was of steel-underframe construction. This train passed Navco, 6.24 miles from Mobile, at 1.16 a. m., according to the train sheet, 18 minutes late, and collided with engine 235 at the crossover while traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 15 to 20 miles an hour.

Engine 235, which was struck about opposite the right main driving wheel, came to rest between the two main tracks, practically upright, with its head end about 15 feet south of the north switch of the crossover and 76 feet north of the point of collision. Engine 178 and its tender were overturned and came to rest on their right sides east of and parallel with the northbound track, with the pilot about 8 feet north of the north switch of the crossover, the forward truck of the first car in train No. 2 was also derailed. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman of train No. 2.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Crowe, of engine 235, stated that he did not know whether train No. 2 had passed and on arriving at the crossover he brought his engine to a stop on the crossover clear of the northbound track and instructed Fireman Mitchell to go back and inquire of the crew of the switch engine concerning train No. 2. Fireman Mitchell asked Engineman Jones of the switch engine, who told him that train No. 2 had not passed and he returned and informed Engineman Crowe accordingly. Engineman Crowe said he decided that he would wait and then in the event he did not see or hear anything of train No. 2 he would return to the engine house, telephone the dispatcher or the station master, and obtain information concerning that train. In the meantime, however, a switchman came to the engine and told him that if he wanted to go to the station ahead of train No. 2 the switchman would handle the switches. Engineman Crowe said he told the switchman to go to the switch and provided nothing was seen or heard of train No. 2 he could enter on the northbound track and proceed to the passenger station ahead of that train. The switchman then started toward the switch and Engineman Crowe said that just before he reached it, the engineman being unable to see the switch from his side of the engine, Fireman Mitchell said, "He is about to the switch. You can move ahead." The engineman in turn told the fireman, "No, wait until he throws the switch and gives the signal." Engineman Crowe said he then looked toward the south but did not see train No. 2 approaching, and on turning around again the fireman said, "All right, come ahead, he has the switch open." Engineman Crowe then started the engine, about 10 seconds from the time he looked toward the south, just as the engine began to move he looked back again, saw train No. 2 close to him and immediately applied the brakes, bringing the engine to a stop within a distance of 8 or 10 feet, the accident occurring immediately afterwards. It also appeared from Engineman Crowe's statements that the headlight was burning, while there was a red light on the rear end of the tender.

Engineman Crowe further stated that it was the practice, when train No. 2 is on time, for an engine herder to bring the engine from train No. 2 back to the engine house and then to let the engine for train No. 33

out on the main track, the regular engine crew proceeding with the engine to the passenger station while the engine herder would follow with the engine for train No. 3, which is scheduled to depart from Mobile at 2.30 a. m. When train No. 2 is late, however, he said that it was the practice for the fireman of the light engine, or a yard switchman, to open the north crossover switch as on this occasion, and allow the engine for train No. 38 to proceed, otherwise it would be compelled to remain at the crossover for train No. 2, and probably for train No. 38, these trains being scheduled to arrive at 1.15 and 2.08 a. m., respectively, delay would then be experienced and probably there would be trouble in getting the engine for train No. 38 to the train. It was with this idea in mind that Engineman Crowe, although not required to go on duty until 1.45 a. m., 30 minutes prior to the departing time of train No. 38, left the roundhouse with engine 235 at 1.20 a. m. The statements of Fireman Mitchell corroborated in substance those of Engineman Crowe, neither of these employees heard the engine whistle sounded or the bell rung on engine 178 as train No. 2 approached.

Switchman Brigman, of switch engine 709, stated that he walked up to the engineman's side of engine 235 as it stood on the crossover, blocking the switch engine, and that Engineman Crowe asked him if he was the engine herder and he told the engineman that he was not. Engineman Crowe then said to him, "How about getting these switches for me?" to which he replied that he would do so, this being the regular practice. Switchman Brigman stated that Engineman Crowe then said, "All right, you go on up there and line that switch over and if I do not see anything I will come out and you get the switches behind me." He also quoted the engineman as saying, "After I get out, if anything shows up I will out-run it to the depot." Switchman Brigman then went to the north crossover switch and opened it, and as he raised up from throwing the switch he saw that engine 235 started to move. Switchman Brigman then gave a proceed signal, after which he heard the crash of the collision and jumped to safety. He did not recall that the engineman asked him anything about train No. 2, as he started walking toward the switch, however, he looked back but did not see any sign of an approaching train and he said he did not again look in that direction. Switchman Brigman further stated that he did not know anything about train No. 2 and that he did not

have a time-table or carry a standard watch, saying that he worked solely upon instructions from his engine foreman and engineman.

None of the other members of the crew of switch engine 759 was aware of anything wrong in time to take action toward preventing the accident; they said the headlight of the engine hauling train No. 2 was burning brightly, estimated the speed of that train to have been between 15 and 20 miles an hour, and said they did not hear the engine whistle sounded or the bell rung.

Conductor Franco, of train No. 2, stated that the first he knew of anything wrong was when the air brakes applied in emergency, one long blast of the engine whistle was sounded while rounding the curve at Choctaw, 1.07 miles south of Mobile, but he could not say as to whether or not the engine bell was ringing. The air brakes had been tested and had worked properly enroute. He estimated the speed of his train to have been between 15 and 18 miles an hour at the time of the accident. Flagman Bradley also estimated the speed of his train to have been between 15 and 18 miles an hour at the time of the accident, while Train Porter Bolling, who was riding in the first car, said that the engine bell was being rung continuously.

Engine Herder Dees stated that at the time of the accident he was at the station with an engine for train No. 2, after the arrival of that train he was going to take engine 178 back to the roundhouse and then take the engine for train No. 38 from the roundhouse to the station, or the engines for both trains Nos. 38 and 3, coupled, provided they were ready to leave the round house. He said that since he had been working in his present capacity, a period of about one month, there had been only one previous occasion when he had permitted an engineman to take an engine out of the roundhouse and proceed with it to the station, and while he did not recall that engineman took the engine on that occasion he did recall that it was the engine for train No. 38. Engine Herder Dees did not have a time-table, did not know whether his watch was a standard watch, had not had his watch inspected, and said he was not furnished with form 19 train orders nor passenger trains were running late, it being his practice to obtain instructions from the yardmaster, who in turn communicated with the dispatcher, as to what movements to make,

occasionally some one would tell him that a train was 20 minutes late, for example, and the switch would be opened and he would proceed with the authority of such information. Engine Herder Dees further stated that he usually arrived at the roundhouse for the engine for train No. 38, and also the engine for train No. 3, provided it is ready to go, at about 1.40 a. m.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the action of Engineman Crowe in starting to move his engine out on the main track on the time of an overdue superior train without protection.

Engineman Crowe was taking the engine to the station preparatory to going out on train No. 38 and stopped on the crossover clear of the northbound track on account of the fact that he did not know whether or not train No. 2 had passed. He received definite information that it had not passed, but after waiting a few minutes one of the members of the nearby switching crew opened the north crossover switch and he started to move his engine out on the main track. His view of the approach of train No. 2 was obscured and when he finally saw that train rounding the curve it was too late for him to prevent the collision. There was some discrepancy between the statements made by Engineman Crowe and those made by the switchman who opened the crossover switch, the enginemen's own statements, however, did not indicate that he accepted the switchman's actions as authority for him to enter on the main track prior to the arrival of train No. 2, but rather that the switchman opened the switch merely as a matter of accommodation.

Under rule 93 of the rules for the government of the operating department, trains are required to approach yard limits under control and to run carefully through such limits, yardmen are expected to use all possible precautions to protect themselves, however, and are required to know what trains are expected and to allow them to pass without delay. The evidence did not indicate that train No. 2 was moving within the yard limits at an excessive rate of speed, and while it is not known whether the fireman of train No. 2 was maintaining a proper lookout on the inside of the curve it

is not believed under the circumstances that there is any reason for holding the engine crew of train No. 2 responsible under the rule referred to above.

With reference to that part of rule 93 requiring yardmen to know what trains are expected, attention is called to the fact that switchmen, except foremen, are not required to carry standard watches or to have a copy of the current time-table, and the same is true of Engine Herder Dees. Such a situation is not conducive to safety in train operation, and the failure of these employees to have time-tables is in violation of general rule L of the operating rules, which requires that all persons whose duties are in any way affected by the time-table must have a correct copy of the time-table with them while on duty. Immediate steps should be taken to remedy this condition.

The 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.