INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE MISSOURI-KANSAS-TEXAS RAILROAD AT PARSONS, KANS., ON FEBRUARY 24, 1928.

April 13, 1928.

To the Commission:

On February 24, 1928, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad near Parsons, Kans., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Nevada Division of the St. Louis District, which extends between Parsons, Kans., and Lindale, Mo., a distance of 99 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. This accident occurred within the yard limits at Parsons at a point about 3½ miles north of the passenger station and 115 feet south of automatic block signal 383.2; approaching this point from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 14,854 feet. From a point 7,400 feet south of the point of accident the grade is practically level for 5,000 feet, and then slightly ascending for a distance of 2,400 feet.

The track is laid with 90-pound rails 33 feet in length, with 20 ties to the rail-length, single spiked, and partly tie-plated, with four rail anchors to each rail; four bolt angle bars are used to connect the rails. The track is ballasted with chats to a depth of from 19 to 21 inches and is well maintained.

The weather was cloudy at the time of the accident, which occurred at 9.15 p.m.

Description

Northbound passenger train No. 6 consisted of three express refrigerator cars, three baggage cars, one combination baggage and mail car, one coach, two Pullman sleeping cars, and one business car, hauled by engine 395, and was in charge of Conductor Dey and Engineman Bowser. The first four and last cars were of steel-underframe construction and the others were of all-steel construction. This train

departed from Parsons at 9.05 p. m., 10 minutes late, and was derailed while traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 25 to 45 miles per hour.

The engine was derailed to the left coming to rest on its left side parallel with the track about 290 feet beyond the point of derailment. The first car was also derailed to the left and came to rest on its left side in a badly-damaged condition, while the rear end of the second car swung to the right, struck and demolished signal 383.2, and then turned over on its right side. The third car was derailed to the right while the next two cars and the forward truck of the sixth car were derailed to the left, none of them being overturned. The employee killed was the fireman.

Summary of evidence

Enginemen Bowser stated that he made a careful inspection of his engine before leaving Parsons and found it to be in good condition, that all the automatic block signals between Parsons and the point of accident displayed clear indications and his train had attained a speed of about 45 miles per hour when the accident occurred, at which time, due to the swaying of the engine, he was unable to reach the brake valve in order to apply the air brakes. He also said that the headlight was in good condition and burning brightly. Due to assisting in getting the fireman out of the wreckage he made no examination of the track except as he went back to the rear of the train for a tool some one called his attention to the track under one of the cars and he saw that the angle bars were loose from the rail, with the bolts and nuts lying nearby, and the spikes removed from the inside of a rail.

Brakeman Phelan stated he was in the rear car at the time of the accident and after getting his flagging equipment he went back to protect the rear of his train. His other statements, as well as those of Train Porter Abbott, brought out nothing of importance, while no statement was obtained from Conductor Dey, who was injured in the accident.

Trainmaster Poole stated that he arrived at the scene of the accident at about 9.52 p. m. and after arranging for removing the fireman he made an examination of the track to determine what caused the accident and found that under the sixth car an inside angle bar had been removed from a rail joint but that the outside angle bar was held by two bolts without nuts; according to other evidence these were the two bolts in the end of the rail south of the joint, and the two bolts in the north half of the joint had been

entirely removed and both the bolts and nuts were lying nearby. Mr. Poole also stated that all spikes on the inside of the rail had been pulled from 14 ties north of the joint; the tie plates, however, were in place and held by the outside spikes. Spikes also had been removed from four ties on the inside of the rail south of the joint; the spike holes were fresh, indicating that the spikes had been removed recently, and the nuts, bolts and washers showed fresh contact. The rail north of this first disconnected joint had been moved northward about 8 feet and there were slight bruises on the end of the rail indicating that it had been struck by something, but it did not appear like a flange mark. The first flange mark was on the tie plate on the first tie north of this joint, the marks indicating that a wheel had traveled on the tie plates a distance of 4 or 5 feet and then had been diverted to the left or west until it ran off the ends of the ties. Trainmaster Poole further stated that when this rail was pulled out of the wreckage so it could be examined by members of the board of inquiry on the night of the accident it was found that the bolts and angle bars at the north end of the rail had also been removed apparently prior to the occurrence of the accident; due to the wreckage, however, he could not at that time find those angle bars or the bolts which had secured them.

Master Mechanic Cornish, who was riding in the first sleeping car at the time of the accident, stated that he heard a crash ahead, felt the vibration and braced himself against the forward seat until the train came to a stop; he estimated its speed at the time of the accident to have been from 42 to 45 miles per hour. He went through the next car ahead and found no one was seriously hurt and then got off the train and proceeded toward the engine to ascertain the extent of the damage. After telephoning for the wrecking crew from a nearby farmhouse and doing what he could to relieve the fireman he made an examination of the track and found the disconnected rail joint as stated by Trainmaster Poole. He thought it was impossible for the engineman to have detected the disconnected joint owing to the fact that the south end of the rail immediately north of the joint had only been moved inward far enough so the flanges of the engine wheels encountered the outside edge of the ball of the rail, as evidenced by a bruised place on the outside corner of the rail and flange marks on the outside of the base of the rail; it was evident that the rail had not been moved inward far enough to disturb the bond wires. This disconnected rail joint was on the fireman's side of the track, but Master Mechanic Cornish stated he thought it would have been impossible for the engineman to have observed this condition even if it had been on the right side of the track.

Roadmaster Nichols, who made an examination of the track about five hours after the occurrence of the accident, corroborated the statements of Trainmaster Poole as to the disconnected rail joint and the pulling of spikes from many of the ties, saying that there were 17 spikes lying under the wreckage which showed evidence of having been pulled with a claw bar. He also stated that there was a flange mark on the disconnected rail which extended a distance of about 20 feet. This rail was moved northward about 10 feet from its original location and the bond wires attached to its southern end showed they had been pulled off the other rail while under great strain. The north end of this rail was also detached and projecting out from under the front end of a car, and was found upon removal to be in good condition, which in his opinion showed that the joint at that end had also been disconnected, otherwise that end of the rail would have been bent or broken in the accident.

Yard Foreman Guice's statements corroborated in substance those of the other witnesses, although he added that after rerailing the first coach he discovered that two more joints had been disconnected and in cleaning up the wreckage and inspecting the broken ends of the ties he discovered that the inside spikes were missing for a distance of probably two rail-lengths. He was of the opinion that the second and third joints north of the disconnected joint under the baggage car had also been disconnected before the accident. He also stated that angle bars which had been missing were found in cleaning up the wreckage the next day.

The statements of Section Foreman Stevenson and Section Laborers Bolinger and Ward substantiated those of the other witnesses. Section Foreman Stevenson stated they had been over this section of track on the day previous to the accident while signal maintainer said he had been over it the morning of the accident, inspecting and oiling all signals between Parsons and the point of accident, and that he found everything in good condition.

Signal Supervisor Dutton stated that the track on which the accident occurred is equipped with a three-position upper-quadrant automatic block-signal system. The disengaging of the bond wires where the rail joint was disconnected would have caused signal 384.4, located about 195 rail-lengths southward, to display a stop indication. He was of the opinion, however, that these bond wires were not disengaged before the accident occurred and if they were, a man familiar with automatic block-signal circuits could have made contact at the broken joint by using some other metallic substance.

Engineman Curtis, in charge of southbound train No. 3, which was the last train to use the track involved in the accident, stated that he passed the point of accident soon after 8.45 p. m. He observed no irregularity in the track, saw no one near the right of way in that vicinity and observed the block signals functioning properly.

Traveling Special Officer Baxley stated that on the afternoon following the accident he and Special Agent Teufel found a claw bar and a wrench buried in the track ballast about seven rail-lengths south of the point of accident. It further developed that upon checking the tools of Yard Foreman Taylor a claw bar and wrench were missing from his tool box located on a cut off about 1/2 mile north of the point of accident.

Vincent Williamson, aged 18, who had escaped from a home for feeble-minded persons at Salem, Oreg., on June 1, 1927, and had previously confessed to wrecking a train on the Chicago & Alton Railroad near Independence, Mo., on February 15, as described in our report No. 1398, confessed to having assisted in disconnecting a rail joint and pulling the spikes in the accident here under investigation. He stated that he left Kansas City a few days after the Chicago & Alton accident, worked for about a week for a farmer near Fort Scott, and then boarded a freight train moving southward towards Parsons, this being on the day of the accident. On being put off the train he made his way toward Parsons and finally met a negro near the point of accident. They spent the afternoon in that vicinity and then went to a tool box he thought was about 1 mile from that point and obtained a claw bar and a wrench. Together they pulled the spikes from both the inside and outside of the west rail. He said it was just about getting dark when they removed the spikes and disconnected the angle bars; they then removed the rail a little, pried it over with a bar, and after breaking the joint and separating the rails the negro dropped what appeared to be a piece of iron in between them. Williamson stated he saw the negro go off with the tools down the track and that he himself went back to Kansas City. He gave two motives for wrecking the train; one was to get revenge for having been put off the freight train near Fort Scott and the other was robbery, although he said he left immediately after disconnecting the track and did not see any train passing in either direction; the reason given him by the negro for desiring to wreck a train was that he was angry because he had been put in jail.

This Williamson boy previously had confessed to attempting to wreck a train on the Union Pacific Railroad in the vicinity of Lenape, Kans., during the night of March 7, 1928 in company with Thaddens W. Atkins, aged 17. He also said

that he was in company of Herman Lemp, who escaped with him from the home for feeble-minded at Salem, Oreg., at the time one of them shot and killed a special officer of the Union Pacific Railroad in the yard of that railroad at Topeka, Kans., in August, 1927, after the special officer had ordered them out of the yard.

On March 26, Vincent Williamson, at Erie, Kans., received a sentence to the penintentiary of from 10 years to life, for malicious tampering with the track resulting in the occurrence of the accident here under investigation.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by malicious tampering with the track.

The investigation developed that a rail joint on the left side of the track had been disconnected, the inside angle bar entirely removed and the outside angle bar held in position with only two bolts, without nuts; spikes had also been removed from the gauge side of the rail north of this joint as well as a few spikes from the gauge side of the rail south of the joint. The evidence also indicated that other joints had been disconnected. After the spikes had been removed from the gauge side of the rail its south or receiving end was moved inward towards the center of the track, thus allowing the wheels to drop off the leaving end of the preceding rail. Subsequently an 18-year old boy said that he and a negro had disconnected the rail joint and pulled the spikes, the negro giving as his reason for desiring to wreck a train the fact that he had been put in jail while the boy said he had been put off of a freight train earlier in the day and wanted to obtain revenge. This boy also stated that he had intended to rob the train but left before any train passed in either direction. This boy also had placed obstructions on the tracks of two other railroads, in one case resulting in a fatal accident, but the obstructions placed on the track of the other railroad were discovered and removed before the passing of a train. This boy had escaped from a home for the feeble-minded; subsequently he was sentenced to a penitentiary for malicious tampering with the track resulting in the occurrence of the accident here under investigation.

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,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.