

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
MOBILE AND OHIO RAILROAD AT HUMBOLDT, TENN., ON
FEBRUARY 20, 1929.

May 25, 1929.

To the Commission:

On February 20, 1929, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad at Humboldt, Tenn., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of one poultry caretaker.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Jackson District of the Jackson Division, extending between Iselin and Cairo, Ill., a distance of 113.66 miles, which is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. At Humboldt there is a passing track 3,619.5 feet in length which parallels the main track on the east. The accident occurred on this passing track within yard limits, at a point 286.5 feet north of the south switch, this switch being located 4,358.5 feet north of the south yard-limit board. Approaching this switch from the south, beginning at the south yard-limit board, the track is tangent to and beyond the switch. The grade at the point of accident is 0.66 per cent ascending for northbound trains.

The switch stand at the south passing-track switch is located on the east side of the track and is equipped with a single-blade target 18 inches in diameter and is 5 feet 9 inches above the base of the stand, the target is only displayed when the switch is set for the passing track. There is a switch leading off the passing track to industrial tracks, located 286.5 feet north of the south passing-track switch.

It was snowing at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 1.40 p. m.

Description

Southbound third-class freight train No. 73 consisted of 10 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 413, and was in charge of Conductor Scott and Engineer Gregory. This train arrived at Humboldt at 12.10 p. m., 1 hour and 25 minutes late. After switching some cars

at this point the train was pulled into clear on the north end of the passing track and the engine proceeded to the south end of the siding to do some switching on the industrial tracks. In order to accomplish this work it was necessary to open the passing-track switch, and it was while this switching was being done that the engine was struck by train No. 54.

Northbound second-class freight train No. 54 consisted of 46 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 462, and was in charge of Conductor Schmidt and Engineman Hillman. This train departed from Jackson, 7.15 miles south of Humboldt, at 12.59 p. m., 4 hours and 14 minutes late, entered the open switch at the south end of the passing track at Humboldt, and collided with the engine of train No. 73 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 18 and 25 miles per hour.

At the time of the accident there was one car coupled behind engine 415, a short distance from some other cars on the passing track. Engine 415 was driven back against those other cars and came to rest 150 feet from the point of collision, the second car from the engine was broken in two and came to rest across the main track and the others were driven northward a considerable distance. Engine 462 was derailed but remained upright. The first seven cars of train No. 54 were derailed, the first four being overturned. Both engines and the cars that were overturned were quite badly damaged and the other derailed cars sustained some damage. The 24th car in train No. 54 was broken in two but was not derailed. The employee killed was the fireman of train No. 54.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Gregory, of train No. 73, stated that some cars had been pulled from one of the industrial tracks and then backed northward on the passing track. A brakeman cut them between the first and second cars and gave a proceed signal but before he had time to release the brakes and start ahead the brakeman pointed in that direction and upon looking toward the south he observed train No. 54 approaching, about two car-lengths from the passing track switch. Realizing that a collision was inevitable he warned the fireman and then jumped off. Engineman Gregory said it was snowing quite hard but that he could see nearly to the south yard-limit board, or approximately $3/4$ of a mile.

The statements of Fireman King, of train No. 73, substantiated those of Engineman Gregory as to the events leading up to the occurrence of the accident. He thought train No. 54 was traveling at a speed of 20 or 25 miles

per hour when it entered the passing track switch.

Brakeman Long, of train No. 73, stated that at the time of the accident six cars were on the passing track behind the engine, one of which was coupled to the engine and was to be placed on one of the industrial tracks. It was when this movement was about to be started, at which time he was about two car-lengths to the rear of his engine, that he looked ahead and saw train No. 54 approaching about three car-lengths from the passing track switch, he signalled his engineman by pointing towards that train and then ran for his own safety. He did not give a proceed signal to the approaching train and felt certain that none was given by the other brakemen, who were located near him. He also said that after the accident the weather conditions were such that he could see the caboose of train No. 54 about 20 or 30 car-lengths distant. Brakeman Long further stated that his crew was in possession of an order that train No. 54 would wait at Carroll, 9.71 miles south of Humboldt, until 1.05 p. m., but as he heard no whistle signals sounded by that train as it approached the point of accident, together with the fact that he was busily engaged in switching, he did not maintain a lookout for it. No one was left to protect the open switch as it was necessary to have all available brakemen in the vicinity of where the switching was being done in order to pass signals.

The statements of Brakemen Ferris and Hicks, of train No. 73, were to the effect that they were standing in the vicinity of the switches at the south end of the yard as train No. 54 was approaching but neither of them observed that train until it had nearly reached the south passing track switch, Brakeman Hicks immediately started towards the switch but soon realized that he could not reach it in time so he started giving stop signals. They gave no proceed signals to that train, which they estimated was traveling at a speed of 25 or 30 miles per hour at the time it entered the passing track. Brakeman Hicks said it was snowing very hard but after the occurrence of the accident he could plainly see the rear end of train No. 54.

Conductor Scott, of train No. 73, had just left the freight office when he heard the crash of the collision. He proceeded to the scene of accident and shortly afterwards continued to the south switch and was able to see the caboose of train No. 54, about 40 car-lengths distant. He also said that the snow storm did not prevent him from identifying any member of his crew at a distance of 50 or 60 car-lengths.

Engineman Hillman, of train No. 54, stated that he held an order to wait at Carroll until 1.15 p. m. for train No. 73 but as he did not meet this train at that point he expected to pass it at Humboldt. His train approached the latter point in a violent snow storm and the velocity of the wind was about 25 miles per hour. He closed the throttle and applied the brakes approximately 60 car-lengths south of the yard-limit board, reducing speed from about 35 miles per hour to 20 miles per hour. Upon reaching a point about 25 car-lengths from the south passing-track switch, and while he was leaning out looking ahead, some one on the left side of the cab called, "Highball, they are in the clear." He ignored this statement and left the brakes applied but the fireman then stepped towards the center of the engine deck and repeated the signal whereupon he moved the brake valve handle to the full release position. Engineman Hillman again looked out when his train was about four car-lengths from the switch and he observed that the engine of train No. 73 was into clear but because of the snow storm he did not discover that the target at the passing-track switch was displayed until he was within one car-length of it; he at once applied the brakes in emergency but on account of having just released them the emergency application had no effect and the speed of his train at the time of the accident was about 18 miles per hour. He also said that he was in a better position to see the switch target, which was located on his side of the track, than the fireman or head brakeman but that owing to the weather conditions it would have been impossible to determine the position of the switch until within three or four car-lengths of it. Engineman Hillman considered that his train was moving under control and could have been brought to a stop by another application of the brakes clear of the south passing-track switch had he not released them, which action was taken only when his attention was called the second time to the fact that the opposing train was in the clear, he depended on the fireman's judgment as he said the fireman was a reliable man and must have received a signal of some kind else he would not have called it.

Head Brakeman Barnes, of train No. 54, stated that while approaching the point of accident he was riding on the fireman's side of the engine looking back to see if there was any fire flying from the wheels, and as his train neared the passing track some one, whom he thought was the fireman, called, "Highball, main line clear", he did not hear this signal repeated. When within two car-lengths of the south switch he looked ahead and observed a man standing on the main track approximately five or six car-lengths north of the switch with his hands raised, which was a slow signal, the accident occurring very shortly afterwards. His other statements brought out

nothing additional of importance.

Conductor Schmidt, of train No. 54, stated that as his train approached Humboldt he felt an application of the brakes and then they were released after which the train travelled approximately 15 car-lengths and then came to a sudden stop. He was looking out the door of the caboose at the time but due to the storm he could only see a distance of four or five car-lengths. He estimated the speed of his train when it passed the yard-limit board at 20 miles per hour and at the time of the accident at 15 to 18 miles per hour. He also said that the air brakes had been working properly and thought the train was under full control, not knowing the conditions existing ahead.

The statements of Flagman Robinson, of train No. 54, brought out no additional facts of importance, except that immediately after the accident he boarded the rear car of his train, looked ahead and noticed some cars across the main track which he thought were about 30 car-lengths distant.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Hillman, of train No. 54, a second-class train, properly to control the speed of his train within yard limits.

The rules provide that within yard limits the main track may be used without protection against second and inferior class trains; second and inferior class trains must move within yard limits prepared to stop within one-half the range of vision, unless the main track is seen or known to be clear. Engineman Hillman understood the requirements of this rule and recently had his attention called to it by receiving a bulletin notice quoting the rule, in addition to having been warned by the trainmaster on his last trip about obeying yard-limit as well as other rules. According to his statements, however, he was notified twice that the opposing train was in the clear, the first time having been when he was approximately 25 car-lengths from the switch, and after releasing the brakes it was not until he was within four car-lengths of the switch, or less, that he observed the engine of train No. 73 on the passing track and apparently he did not notice that the switch was open until his own engine had almost reached it. Engineman Hillman was confident that his fireman must have received some signal that the way was clear but according to the statements of the crew of train No. 73 no such signal had been given to the approaching train. Regardless of this fact, however, if

the weather conditions were such as to restrict the engineman's view to a distance of four car-lengths, or less, then under rule 93 he should have been prepared to stop within two carlengths, as it was, the speed of his train was at least 18 miles per hour when the accident occurred.

The employees involved were experienced men, at the time of the accident the crew of train No. 54 had been on duty 1 hour and 40 minutes and the crew of train No. 73, 6 hours and 10 minutes, after off-duty periods of more than 12 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.