

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC LINES IN LOUISIANA AND TEXAS
AT RICOHOC, LA., ON MARCH 22, 1925.

July 23, 1925.

To the Commission

On March 22, 1925, there was a head-end collision between two passenger trains on the line of the Morgan's Louisiana & Texas Railway and Steamship Company, Southern Pacific Lines, at Ricohoc, La., resulting in the death of 6 passengers, 5 employees and 2 other persons, and the injury of 3 passengers, 6 employees and 4 other persons.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Algiers subdivision of the Lafayette division, extending between Lafayette, La., and the New Orleans terminal, a distance of 144.6 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. On this line eastward trains are superior by direction. The accident occurred at a point 887 feet east of the east passing-track switch at Ricohoc, approximately 92 miles west of New Orleans. In the vicinity of the point of accident the grade is practically level, approaching from the west the track is tangent for several miles and approaching from the east the track is tangent for a distance of 1,322 feet; then there is a 1° 40' curve to the right 1,500 feet in length followed by tangent for 152 feet to the point of accident. The passing track at Ricohoc is located on the south side of the main track and is slightly less than 1 mile in length. There is a water tank located on the north side of the main track 3,939 feet west of the east passing-track switch. The station sign board is located 2,511 feet west of the east passing-track switch and there are two road crossings located 2,473 feet and 1,062 feet, respectively, west of the east passing-track switch.

The automatic block signals on this line are of the two-position, lower-quadrant type, home signals governing the movements in both directions are located at each end of the passing track at Ricohoc and there is a distant

signal governing westbound movements located 0.5 mile east of the east passing-track switch, and a distant signal governing eastbound movements located 0.6 mile west of the west passing-track switch. The colors of night signal indications are red, yellow, and green, for stop, caution, and proceed, respectively.

The accident occurred at about 3 a. m., at which time there was a dense fog.

Description

The trains involved in this accident were eastbound passenger train No. 12, known as the New Orleans Limited, and westbound passenger train No. 109, known as the Sunset Express. These trains are scheduled to meet at Ricohoc at 2.56 a. m.; on the date of this accident train order No. 3 required train No. 12 to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m. for train No. 109.

Train No. 12 consisted of engine 601, one combination baggage and mail car, one baggage car, two coaches, one chair car, one tourist car and three sleeping cars, in the order named, all cars being of steel construction. This train was in charge of Conductor Crane and Engineman Mathews. It left Lafayette at 1.20 a. m., on time, the train crew having received at that point the train order requiring it to wait until 3.05 a. m. at Ricohoc for train No. 109. This train passed Bayou Sale, the end of double track and the last open telegraph office, 3.9 miles west of Ricohoc, at 2.54 a. m., seven minutes late, according to the train sheet, passed Ricohoc prior to the time specified in the wait order and had nearly come to a stop east of the east passing-track switch at Ricohoc when it collided with train No. 109.

Train No. 109 consisted of engine 615, one combination baggage and mail car, one baggage car, two coaches, one chair car, one tourist car, and four sleeping cars, in the order named, all cars being of steel construction. This train was in charge of Conductor Dunshie and Engineman Conery. This train left New Orleans according to the train sheet at 11.30 p. m., on time. It left Morgan City, approximately 11 miles east of Ricohoc, at 2.33 a. m., nine minutes late, having received at that point a copy of the order requiring train No. 12 to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m., departed from Patterson, the last open telegraph office, 5.1 miles east of Ricohoc, at 2.52 a. m., according to the train sheet and collided with train No. 12 while running at a speed variously estimated to have been between 20 and 35 miles an hour.

As a result of the collision both engines were derailed and badly damaged. The engine tender of train No. 109 telescoped the rail end of the combination car for a distance of about 20 feet and the baggage car of train No. 12 telescoped the coach in the rear of it, which was occupied by colored passengers, for about two-thirds of its length. The employees on duty who were killed were the engineman of train No. 109 and the train porter of train No. 12.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Dunshie, of train No. 109, stated that under the wait order his train had ample time to go to Ricohoc and take siding to meet train No. 12. Approaching Ricohoc at the usual rate of speed, the engineman sounded the station whistle signal and Conductor Dunshie then sounded the meeting point signal by means of the communicating signal system, which the engineman acknowledged by three blasts of the engine whistle, two long and one short. Shortly afterwards the brakes were applied for the purpose of reducing speed approaching the meeting point and this was soon followed by the shock of the collision. Conductor Dunshie thought the accident occurred at 2.58 a. m.; he stated that he looked at his watch at 2.57 a. m. and the accident occurred a short time afterwards, possibly one minute. He stated that when the collision occurred he was thrown off his feet and somewhat bewildered, but afterwards found his lantern, secured a match from a passenger and lighted it, walked the length of the colored coach in which he was riding, got down on the ground and looked at his watch, at which time it was 3 a. m. He thought the speed of his train at the time of the collision was not more than 35 miles an hour, and possibly not as high as that. Shortly after the accident he met Engineman Mathews and asked him how it happened; Engineman Mathews replied, "I got by the block, the fog was so thick I couldn't see it." Other members of the crew of train No. 109 stated that the accident occurred about 2.59 or 3 a. m., and that the train was running at a speed of about 20 miles an hour. Fireman Newby, of train No. 109, was injured and had no recollection of events immediately prior to the accident.

Conductor Crane, of train No. 12, stated that his watch was five seconds slow when he compared with a standard clock before leaving Lafayette. He received four train orders at Lafayette, one of which directed train No. 12 to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m. for train No. 109. He delivered these orders to Engineman Mathews before the train departed from Lafayette, but did not see him read them. Approaching Ricohoc he sounded one blast of the communicating signal to remind engineman of the wait order for train No. 109, which the engineman answered by the

proper signal, two long and one short blasts of the steam whistle. He was riding in the rear seat of the rear compartment of the colored coach, and on the left or north side of the car. When the train passed the water tank the speed had not been reduced, and he then sounded two blasts of the communicating signal as a signal to stop at once. He thought the engineman acknowledged this signal by one blast of the steam whistle, instead of two, and becoming alarmed he looked out of an open window just as he heard the wheels rumbling over the frog at the east end of Ricohoc passing track. He then jumped for the conductor's valve and pulled it open by using the handle of the valve. When he felt the brakes respond in emergency application he released his grip of the handle and was standing in the aisle facing the front end, and he thought his train had come to a stop. The shock of the collision knocked him down, when he got on his feet he looked at his watch and it was 3 a. m. He noticed the position of the home block signal at the east end of Ricohoc about 45 minutes after the accident and observed that it was in the stop position and the light showing red when the rear end of his train was about 25 feet east of this signal. He saw Engineman Mathews after the collision, the engineman telling him that he missed the block signal. Two railroad employees who were passengers on train No. 12 said that when approaching Ricohoc the meeting-point signal was sounded by means of the communicating signal system, and one of them stated that a moment or two afterwards the conductor pulled the signal cord down twice.

Engineman Mathews, of train No. 12, stated that his watch was 12 seconds slow when he compared with a standard clock before leaving Lafayette. He received orders before leaving Lafayette, one of which was a wait order directing train No. 12 to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m., for train No. 109, he said he read these orders and understood them thoroughly. His train was on time at Olivier, but he lost about 8 or 10 minutes backing over to the west-bound track at Olivier and crossing back to the eastbound track at Jeanerette, he then maintained schedule up to Bayou Sale, when he reduced speed to pick up a register check, it was 2.54 a. m., just before picking up register check. At the station mile board west of Ricohoc, while running at a speed of 45 or 50 miles per hour, he sounded the station whistle signal and answered the conductor's meeting point signal given with the communicating signal. The weather was very foggy and he could not see signals until he nearly reached them, but he observed that the distant and home signals just west of Ricohoc were clear. The siding at Ricohoc being long, he made a light service application of the brakes when near the west switch and partially closed the throttle, the safety valve popped off and he moved his head inside the cab to indicate his disapproval to the fireman for letting the valve pop. On

account of the noise of the escaping steam he missed the sound of passing the water tank. He did not know exactly how long he had his head inside of the cab, but during this time he evidently lost his bearings, as when he put his head outside again he could still see the rails of the passing track and thought he had ample time to stop clear of the east switch. While looking for land marks he suddenly observed the block signal at east end of Ricohoc showing red through the fog a short distance ahead, and at the same time he heard the fireman call, "Look out, Doc," he immediately applied the air brakes in emergency and sounded one blast of the steam whistle. The fireman jumped and shouted to him to do likewise. He did not feel in any immediate danger at first, but later observing the headlight of train No. 109 getting quite close he jumped from the gangway steps to the ground when his train had nearly stopped. He thought the trains collided at about 3.03 a. m. He said he did not hear any communicating stop signal after the meeting point signal, nor did he notice any application of the train brakes from the rear prior to his making the emergency application. He did not hear the fireman say anything to him about the wait order, except when calling to him to look out just before he made the emergency application. The air brakes were in proper working condition. He stated that he did not forget the wait order but simply lost his bearings in the fog. A conductor who was a passenger on train No. 12 stated that a short time after the accident he met Engineman Mathews who told him that he passed the two road crossings between switches at Ricohoc without noticing them and that he lost his bearings in the fog.

Fireman Thibodeaux, of train No. 12, stated that his watch was correct when he compared it with a standard clock in the telegraph office before leaving Lafayette, and before leaving there they received an order to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m. for train No. 109. At the mile board west of Ricohoc the conductor gave the air whistle signal for the meeting point, which was answered by the engineman, who then took a time-table from his seat box and looked at it. As the engine passed the west switch he prepared to operate the firing valve and blower, expecting the engineman to shut off steam, but when his train passed the water tank without any effort having been made to reduce speed he said he told the engineman that their time there was 2.56 a. m., that train No. 109 was not in the clear, and that they had an order to wait at Ricohoc until 3.05 a. m. When passing the telephone booth he called to the engineman and told him he had better stop, but the engineman apparently did not hear or understand him and he then shouted loudly "Stop her," put out the fire and got down on the gangway. The engineman then applied brakes in emergency, when the engine was about six or eight car lengths from the east switch, and the train was running at

a speed of between 40 and 45 miles an hour. The brakes reduced the speed of the train to about 6 miles an hour, he judged, at the time of the accident, and he jumped to the ground about 50 feet from the point of collision. The weather was very foggy and block signals could not be seen until very close to them. He did not observe anything wrong with Engineman Mathews at any time on the trip prior to arriving at Ricochoc, and he did not take decisive action himself to stop the train because the engineman had his hand on the brake valve and he expected him to apply the brakes in time to stop as the passing track was on the engineman's side. He did not see the signals as when he got close enough to see them through the fog the front end of the engine obstructed his view. His watch was broken by his fall when he jumped from the engine and it stopped at 2.57 a. m., which he stated as the time the collision occurred. He also stated that when meeting train No. 109 at Ricochoc in foggy weather it was customary for train No. 12 to approach under control expecting to find the east-bound home signal at the west end in stop position, and that Engineman Mathews did not approach the station under control on this occasion.

Brakeman Ferris, of train No. 12, stated that he had read the train orders, and he knew they had a wait order until 3.05 a. m. at Ricochoc for train No. 109. He was riding on the rear platform of the train from Bayou Sale to the point of accident, and when they passed the west switch at Ricochoc, at about 45 miles an hour, without any reduction in speed being made he thought that train No. 109 must be in the clear in the passing track, but after passing the second road crossing, about 20 car lengths from the east switch, and seeing nothing of train No. 109 in the passing track, he assumed they had received orders at Bayou Sale changing the meeting point to Patterson. He felt the emergency application of the brakes just before the shock of collision. He thought he could see a red signal a distance of about one car length through the fog.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of train No. 12 to approach home signals at Ricochoc under control as required by the rules, failure to wait at Ricochoc as directed by train order, and failure to stop before passing the block signal at the east end of Ricochoc passing track which was in stop position, for which Engineman Mathews is primarily responsible.

The rules provide in part as follows:

Rule 518. In foggy and stormy weather, trains must approach both distant and home signals with care.

Rule 673. Enginemen are reminded that, although the distant signal may indicate the position of the home signal, the home signal may assume the "stop" position after the train has passed the distant signal indicating "proceed."

Form E of train orders, example 3 No. 1 wait at Y until nine fifty nine 9.59 a. m. for No. 2. The train first named must not pass the designated point before the time given, unless the other train has arrived. *****

Engineman Mathews did not offer any adequate explanation for his failure properly to control his train, and it is difficult to understand how an engineman of his experience could have become so confused as to his location, notwithstanding the fact that there was a dense fog. Because of this fog, which materially obscured the view of signals, he should have exercised extraordinary care, when he received and acknowledged the meeting-point signal given by the conductor he should have gotten his train under proper control and have approached the switches and signals at Ricoche prepared to stop.

Fireman Thibodeaux should have been more alert to the impending danger, and when the train passed the water tank and telephone booth without any reduction in speed having been made, he should have taken decisive action which was then necessary to avoid running beyond the east switch. According to the statement of Fireman Thibodeaux, he had the wait order clearly in mind and was fully aware of the fact that Engineman Mathews did not approach the home signals at the meeting point with care and was not controlling the speed of his train so as to be able to stop short of the east passing-track switch, notwithstanding this, when he finally warned the engineman, it was too late to prevent the accident.

An adequate automatic train control system would have prevented this accident.

None of the employees involved in this accident was on duty contrary to the provisions of the hours of service law. Engineman Mathews entered railroad service in 1889, was fireman from 1894 to 1900 when he was promoted to engineman, and has been a regular freight and extra

-8-

passenger engineman on this line for more than 20 years. At the time of this accident he was relieving the regular passenger engineman and this was his second trip on this run. Fireman Thibodeaux was a promoted engineman, having had about 14 years' experience as fireman.

Respectfully submitted,

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Director, Bureau of
Safety.