

In re Investigation of an accident which occurred on the New Orleans, Texas & Mexico Railway at Cholpe, La., on August 30, 1917.

October 9, 1917

On August 30, 1917, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the New Orleans, Texas & Mexico Railway at Cholpe, La., which resulted in the death of 1 passenger, the injury of 1 employee who afterwards died, and the injury of 16 passengers. After the investigation of this accident the Chief of the Division of Safety reports as follows:

The train involved in this derailment was eastbound passenger train No. 2, en route from Houston, Texas, to New Orleans, La. It consisted of 1 baggage car of steel-underframe construction, 1 combination car of wooden construction, 1 coach with steel underframe, 1 Pullman sleeping car and 1 Pullman tourist car, hauled by locomotive 16, and was in charge of Conductor Ennis and Engineman Finnegan. It passed Port Barre, La., the last open telegraph office, at 2.50 a.m., 4 minutes late, and about 3.36 a.m. was derailed at the west end of the passing track at Cholpe, 30.1 miles east of Port Barre. At the time of the derailment the train was 2 minutes late, and was traveling at a speed of about 40 miles an hour.

The second district of the Louisiana Division, on which this accident occurred, is a single-track line extending between Requinoy and Anchorage, La., a distance of 135.0 miles. Train movements are governed by time-table and train orders; no block signal system is in use. The speed limit for passenger trains is 45 miles an hour.

At the point of accident, and for several miles approaching it from the west, the track is tangent. It is laid with 80-pound rails 33 feet in length, on a fill of about 4 feet. The rails are single-spiked to about 21 cypress ties to the rail; no tie plates are used; at the joints 4-hole angle bars are used. The track is well ballasted and well maintained. The rails and practically all the ties are new; the grade is level at the point of derailment.

The first marks of derailment were found at a point 143 feet 10 inches west of the west switch leading to the passing track, located on the north side of the main track. One was a flange mark 15 inches inside the south rail, and the other was a corresponding flange mark outside the north rail. Both these marks extended straight ahead on the ties for about 47 feet; then for a distance of 12 feet no mark was found on the outside of the north rail. Both marks then extended a distance of 30 feet, after which for a distance of 9 feet there was no mark on the inside of the south rail; then, after both marks had extended an additional distance of 17 feet together, no mark was found

on the outside of the north rail for 28 feet, or to the point of the passing track switch. Up to this point the marks had remained practically parallel with the rails. From this point the track was badly torn up, 10 rails in the passing track and 5 rails in the main track being bent, and 102 ties in the passing track and 28 ties in the main track being broken.

The locomotive came to a stop on the track 1,417 feet beyond the point of derailment; the tender came to rest across the track with its rear end several feet to the left of normal position. The body of the baggage car came to rest on its left side 684 feet to the rear of the locomotive and 300 feet east of its trucks, parallel with and on the north side of the passing track, or about 35 feet from the main track. The rear cylinder head of the brake cylinder on the tender was torn out; the right safety chain between the engine and tender was broken, and the coupling irons were displaced, allowing the tender to strike and break the driver brake cylinder pipe; the brakes on the locomotive and tender were thus rendered totally inoperative, which accounted for the distance of 684 feet between it and the body of the baggage car. The body of the combination car came to rest on its left side about 96 feet to the rear of that of the baggage car, with its front end 25 feet and its rear end 18 feet from the main track. The coach came to rest in an upright position 70 feet from the combination car, on top of trucks of the preceding cars, all of which trucks were bunched on and between the main and passing tracks in a space of about 50 feet; it lay diagonally across both the main track and the passing track and its rear end remained attached to the Pullman sleeping car. The Pullman cars were not damaged; their north or left wheels rested on the web of overturned rails on the north side of the main track. At the time of derailment the weather was foggy. The conductor of the train was so badly injured that his death occurred the day after the accident.

Engineman Finnegan stated that he looked at his watch just before the derailment occurred and it was 3.36 a. m.; and that the speed of the train was about 40 miles an hour; he considered the track at the point of accident as being in good condition. He stated that he heard a noise, seemingly under the baggage car, just before reaching the switch to the passing track, applied the brakes and looked back; he did not think the tender was then off the track. He said that he knew that the train then fouled the passing track switch, because the tender was pulled about; and that the baggage car broke loose about at the switch. He stated that there were about 1,500 or 1,600 gallons of fuel oil in the tanks on the tender, and about half a tank of water; that this class of tender did not rock more than the average tender he had seen, and that approaching

the point of accident the locomotive did not rock unusually much. Engineman Finnegan stated that he had no idea as to what caused the derailment. He also stated that after the accident he examined the track, and beginning about 6 rail lengths west of the switch he found a mark on a rail, which extended a distance of about 2 rail lengths before dropping down on the ties.

Fireman Giles stated that at the time of accident he was riding on the left side of the locomotive; that he felt no unusually rough spots in the track in that vicinity, and that the speed was between 35 and 40 miles an hour when the train was derailed. He stated that his first intimation of the accident was when he noticed dust flying from the tender, after the engine and tender had passed the switch; he looked back and saw that the rear of the tender had been derailed, broken loose from the rest of the train, and was leaning toward the passing track. He said that on account of the dust he was unable to see farther back than the rear of the tender.

Baggageman McQuirk stated that at the time of accident he was in the middle of the baggage car; he felt the wheels strike the ties, and within what seemed to be no more than three seconds the car turned over. He said he felt two distinct jerks, and thought that the baggage car broke loose from the combination car and then the locomotive broke loose from the baggage car. He stated that he did not notice any rough spots in the track approaching the point of derailment.

Flagman Gilson stated that he was riding in the combination car, and that he received his first intimation of the derailment when the car began to jump and turned over on its left side.

Superintendent Choate stated that he arrived at scene of the accident between 7.45 and 8.05 a.m., and that, after looking over the position of the derailed cars, he was of the opinion that the combination car was the first to be derailed.

Section Foreman Stampley stated that this section consisted of 10 miles of main track and 1-1/2 miles of side track, and that during the past 30 days he had had an average of 13 men on his gang. He said that about 12 days prior to the date of the accident he did some work in the vicinity of the point of derailment, in the way of raising up low spots in the track; and that at that time he did not find the track much out of surface, and the gauge was perfect. Section Foreman Guerin, who was substituting for Section Foreman Stampley because of the latter being ill, stated that on the day of the accident he twice rode over the track on a motor car, in the immediate vicinity of the switch near which the derailment occurred, and considered the track as being in first class condition.

Master Mechanic Lavallee, at Dequincy, stated that 3 or

4 weeks before the accident the outside of both top sidebearings on the rear tender truck had been planed off, because the one on the right side was chafing the arch bar.

Locomotive 16 is an oil-burning locomotive of the 4-4-0 type, the engine weighing 133,800 pounds. The tender, ready for service, weighs 107,200 pounds; it has a wheel base of 17 feet 6 inches, and the distance from the rail to the top of the oil reservoir, over the water cistern, is 10 feet 11 inches. The capacity of the water cistern is 4,500 gallons, and at the time of accident it was about half full; the oil reservoirs, whose total capacity is 2,300 gallons, contained about 1,600 gallons of oil. There are three vertical flanges, each about a foot in width, at the rear wall of the water cistern, but there are no longitudinal splash-bars in this tank.

A careful examination of the track, proceeding westward from the point of derailment, taking the south rail as a base and alternating between the joints on the north and south rails, disclosed that there was no greater variation in surface than 1/4 inch for the first 8 joints. With the exception of this slight irregularity the track was in first-class condition. The cause of the accident could not be determined.

The investigation failed to produce sufficient evidence upon which to base any positive opinion as to the cause of derailment, or as to what part of the train actually was first to be derailed.

WFB:RCJ