

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE NEW YORK CENTRAL RAILROAD AT BELLE ISLE, N.Y., ON OCTOBER 9, 1925.

January 18, 1926.

To the Commission:

On October 9, 1925, there was a side collision between two portions of a cut of freight cars being switched by a yard engine on the New York Central Railroad at Belle Isle, N.Y., resulting in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

At Belle Isle there is a train yard composed of numerous tracks, switches, and crossovers, these tracks extend from west to east, paralleling the main tracks on the north, and terminate at their eastern ends in a lead track. There are four yard tracks numbered from south to north, as follows: 1, 2, 3 and 4, those yard tracks are connected with each other by crossovers, the crossover switches on each yard track being a short distance west of the switch connecting the particular yard track with the lead track. The accident occurred at the crossover connecting yard tracks 1 and 2, which for the purpose of this report will be referred to as No. 1 crossover. This crossover is 154 feet in length, and its east switch, the one involved, is located on yard track 1 at a point about 285 feet west of the lead track; it is a facing-point switch for westbound movements. The switch stand is a low, upright, side-lever throw, No. 20 Ramapo stand, located on the south side of track 1, and is equipped with a 24-hour oil-burning switch lamp, the center of the 5-inch lens being $25\frac{1}{2}$ inches above the headblock. Night indications are luna white for straight movements, the normal position, and yellow for diverging movements, and under ordinary conditions the switch lamp is plainly visible at night, approaching from the direction of the lead track, for a distance of about 400 feet, this lamp, however, was not burning at the time of the accident. The grade is about 0.2 per cent descending toward the west.

There was a high wind blowing, accompanied by a sleet storm, at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 7.35 p.m.

Description

Eastbound freight train extra 3692, consisting of 40 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 3692, was in charge of Conductor Smith and Engineman Williams. This train arrived at Belle Isle over the eastbound freight track, at about 6.35 p.m., with instructions to back across to the yard and set the train out on the west end of yard track 3, which was done. After the train had been backed in on yard track 3 the crew of yard engine 242 closed the switches on yard tracks 2 and 3 in order to pick up some cars on yard track 2, they did not, however, close the east switch of No. 1 crossover, on yard track 1. In departing from the yard, at about 7 p.m., engine 3692 proceeded to Solvay engine house, located about 1 mile east of Belle Isle, and the various crossover switches were again opened to permit the movement to be made, but the switch lamp at the east switch of No. 1 crossover was not burning and Brakeman Craig failed to restore the switch to its normal position.

At about 7.30 p.m. yard engine 242, headed west, in charge of Conductor DeGarmo and Engineman Slattery, shoved a cut of eight cars from the lead track in on yard track 2, kicking in the four cars at the west end of the cut. The four remaining cars were then pulled back on the lead track and shoved in on yard track 1, it being intended to pick up a car standing on this track, but on reaching the open switch at the east end of the crossover the leading car entered the switch, at a speed of about 3 or 4 miles an hour, and cornered the side of the second car from the east end of the cut of four cars that had just been placed on yard track 2.

The two freight cars that collided, refrigerator cars, were somewhat damaged, but not derailed. The employee killed was the conductor of yard engine 242, who was riding on the step on the north side at the head end of the first car to enter the open switch.

Summary of evidence

Brakeman Craig, of extra 3692, stated that when his engine pulled out of yard track 3, after setting out the train, he rode on the rear side step on the fireman's side of the tender, and on reaching No. 1 crossover he got off and walked ahead to handle the switches after the engine had passed. He said that the switch lamp was not burning on the east switch of the crossover, on yard track 1, and that he did not notice that the switch was open, otherwise he would have closed it.

Head Brakeman Welch had opened the various crossover switches when his train backed in on yard track 3, and after his engine had left yard track 3 he closed the switches on yard tracks 3 and 2. He thought that the switch lamp of the switch involved, and also the one on yard track 2, leading to yard track 3, were not burning at the time his train backed in, and said he had intended reporting this matter to the yardmaster but forgot to do so. Flagman Lemp stated that as the train backed in on yard track 3, he noticed these switch lamps were not burning. Conductor Smith was at the yard office, located north of the yard tracks and east of the switch involved, when the engine left the yard, and did not know how the switches were left by the members of his train crew. Engineman Williams and Fireman Bombard did not notice any switch lamps not burning.

Brakeman Pudney, of yard engine 242, stated that he was riding on the side ladder at the west end of the first car ahead of the engine when the four cars were shoved in on yard track 1, and that Conductor DeGarmo, who had a lighted white lantern in his hand, was riding on the north step at the west end of the leading car. Brakeman Pudney did not notice that the switch light of the switch involved was not burning and the first intimation he had of anything wrong was when he saw the conductor's lantern go out; he immediately gave Engineman Slattery a stop signal and the air brakes were applied, the cars coming to a stop within less than a car length.

Engineman Slattery, of yard engine 242, stated that after the switch leading from the lead track to yard track 1 was opened, Conductor DeGarmo gave him a proceed signal, from the head end of the cut, and the cars were shoved in on yard track 1 at a low rate of speed, between 2 and 4 miles an hour. Shortly afterwards Brakeman Pudney, who was riding on the car ahead of the engine, gave him a stop signal and about the same time he saw the conductor's lantern disappear, and immediately applied the air brakes, bringing the cars to a stop within less than a car-length. Fireman Wales stated that he was riding on his seat box while the cars were being shoved in on yard track 1, and although he was in position to have seen the switch lamps, he could not say whether or not the one involved was burning at this time.

Brakeman Riggs, of yard engine 242, stated that at the time the four cars were shoved in on yard track 1 he was on yard track 2 at the east end of the four cars that were kicked in on this track. When the west car of the four cars being shoved by the yard engine

passed him on yard track 1 he saw Conductor DeGarmo riding on the north step at the west end of the car, and the first knowledge he had of anything wrong was when the accident occurred.

Yardmaster McCarthy stated that he personally observed the crossover switch lamps at about 6.25 p.m., more than an hour prior to the accident, and at this time they were all lighted and the switches were in normal position. He was at the yard office at the time the accident occurred. Immediately after the accident Yardmaster McCarthy together with Brakemen Pudney and Riggs, of yard engine 242, observed that the switch lamp of the crossover switch involved was not burning.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch.

Brakemen Welch and Craig rode back with engine 3692 to the crossover switches and handled switches both ahead of and behind the engine. Apparently Brakeman Craig handled those on yard track 1 and overlooked closing the east switch of No. 1 crossover after the engine had used it. Had either of these employees made it their business to see that the switches used by engine 3692 were properly closed, this accident would not have occurred.

The evidence was to the effect that Conductor DeGarmo, of yard engine 242, was thoroughly familiar with conditions in Belle Isle yard and was riding in a position on the west car where he could have observed switch lamp indications. Had he been maintaining a proper lookout ahead, he could have seen that the switch lamp was extinguished, and then should have been governed by rule 27, which provides that the absence of a signal at a place where a signal is usually shown, must be regarded as the most restrictive indication that can be given by that signal.

Head Brakemen Welch and Flagman Lemp, of extra 3692, noticed that the switch lamp was not burning at the time their train used the crossover to back in on yard track 3, and the head brakeman said he intended to report the matter to the yardmaster, but forgot to do so. Had these employees made it their business to have the switch lamp relighted at this time, it is possible the accident would not have occurred.

The majority of the employees involved were experienced men, and 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.