

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 HARMON, N. Y.,
ON JANUARY 22, 1927.

March 16, 1927.

To the Commission:

On January 22, 1927, there was a collision between a train of empty passenger equipment and a cut of standing cars on the New York Central Railroad at Harmon, N. Y., which resulted in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Electric Division extending between Grand Central Terminal, New York City, and Croton, N. Y., a distance of 33.86 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a four-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders and an automatic block-signal system, the tracks are numbered from north to south, 3, 1, 2, and 4. There is a yard at Harmon and many of the yard tracks are located on the south side of the main tracks. Beginning at dwarf signal 14, located just east of CR signal station, near the eastern end of the yard, reverse movements from eastbound track 4 to the yard tracks on the south side of the main tracks are made through a series of switches leading to a point on track 14 where a switch leads off to what is known as ladder E. The first switch on this ladder track leads to track 38, while the second switch leads off to storage tracks 76 and 78, the accident occurred on track 38 at a point about 225 feet west of its eastern end. That part of track 14 west of the switch leading to ladder E is used at night for the storage of passenger equipment and during the day as a running track, while track 38 is used as a running track at all times, movements over it being governed by yard rules. The switches governing movements from the main track to the ladder track are controlled by the signalman at CR signal station, but switches leading from the ladder track are controlled by hand-throw switch stands of the low type; at night these switch stands are equipped with lights. The switch governing movements from the ladder track to track 38 is the only one in this vicinity that bears a number.

There was a dense fog at the time of the accident, which occurred about 1.40 a.m.

Description

Eastbound freight train NY-10 consisted of 40 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 3669, and was in charge of Conductor Cornish and Engineman Chase. It arrived at CR signal station at 12.25 a. m. on track 4. There were 15 cars of coal on the head end of the train which were to be set out in Harmon yard and the crew received instructions from the signalman to place them on track 78. Through error, however, they were placed on track 38 and they were standing on that track when struck by the empty equipment train.

The eastbound train of empty passenger equipment consisted of nine multiple-unit cars, all of steel construction, in charge of Engineman Kiley and Brakeman Hannay. This train arrived at CR signal station on track 4 at about 1.25 a. m. The route was then lined for a reverse movement into the yard and after placing three cars on track 14, west of the switch leading to the ladder track, a movement was being made into the yard on running track 38 when the train, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 15 miles an hour, collided with the cut of 15 coal cars which had been left on that track by the crew of train NY-10.

The front vestibule of the leading car in the multiple-unit train was crushed, while the rear vestibule of this car and the front vestibule of the following car were badly damaged. The forward end of the first car in the standing cut was considerably damaged. The employee killed was the engineman of the multiple-unit train.

Summary of evidence

Signalman McGranaghan, on duty in CR signal station, stated that at about the time train NY-10 arrived on track 4 the yardmaster called him by telephone and informed him that that train had 15 cars of coal to be set out and instructed him to notify the crew to place them on track 78. Shortly afterwards Head Brakeman Brockley came into the signal station and he told the brakeman what the yardmaster had said. The brakeman inquired as to the location of track 78 and Signalman McGranaghan told him he did not know, but thought that the switches were numbered. Signalman McGranaghan then lined up the switches for the movement to ladder E, and 15 cars were cut off from the head end of the train and backed in toward the yard. On account of the foggy weather Signalman McGranaghan could not see on what track the cars were placed, but supposed they had been placed on track 78. When the multiple-unit train arrived he lined up the switches for that train to set off some cars on the storage portion of track 14, and then lined them up for a movement to ladder E. Signalman McGranaghan could not say

at what speed this train was traveling at the time it collided with the cut of cars, but said he thought it was moving at a speed of from 12 to 15 miles an hour when passing the signal station.

The statements of Head Brakeman Brockley practically corroborated those of the signalman as to the conversation between the two men. The head brakeman then returned to his train and told Conductor Cornish of the instructions received from the signalman, but did not say anything to him about the fact that the target of the switch leading to track 38 was marked with the number of the track. Conductor Cornish, who said he had been in through freight service and had never had occasion to set out cars in Harmon yard, did not know of the location of track 78 and according to his statements when he asked the head brakeman where the track was located the latter replied that it was "the last track over." The 15 cars were cut off and pulled ahead to clear the switch leading from track 4 to the various yard tracks, while Conductor Cornish walked across the tracks to look over the position of the switches and to see if there were any cars on the track he thought was track 78; he did not change the position of any of the switches. Head Brakeman Brockley signaled the enginemen to begin the back-up movement and when the leading car passed the conductor he told Brakeman MacLucky, who was riding on that car, to be very careful on account of the foggy weather, and then walked beside the cars transmitting signals from Brakeman MacLucky to Brakeman Brockley, the latter being on the cars near the engine. After the cars had been placed on the track supposed to have been track 78, Conductor Cornish returned to his caboose and Brakeman MacLucky returned to the train with the engine, while Brakeman Brockley closed the switch leading from the ladder track to the track on which the cars had been placed, even then he did not notice the number on the switch target.

Brakeman Hannay, the only member of the crew of the multiple-unit train other than the engineman who was killed, had been on this run for a period of five nights prior to that on which the accident occurred. He said that the switch leading to track 38 was usually set for that track but that the yardmaster had told him to pay particular attention to the switch as sometimes it was found lined for a movement on the ladder track. Upon the arrival of his train at CR signal station he found the switch set for a movement on the ladder track, and knowing that train NY-10 had had some cars to set off on track 78 he assumed they had been placed on that track and that the crew had left the switch set for the lead track, he then lined the switch for track 38 but did not notice the coal cars. After the required switching movements had been made to set off the three cars on track 14, the engineman using the head end of the train at all times, the train proceeded to enter the yard through track 38, shortly after which the collision

occurred. At this time Brakeman Hannay was walking toward the head end of the train and had reached the second car; he did not think the brakes were applied before the accident occurred and estimated the speed of his train at the time to have been about 15 miles an hour.

Conclusions

This accident was caused primarily by the failure of the crew of train NY-10 to place the cars from their train on track 78, as instructed by the yardmaster, and by the failure of Engineman Kiley, of the multiple-unit train, either to maintain a proper lookout or to operate his train under proper control within yard limits.

The crew of train NY-10 understood thoroughly that the cars from their train were to be placed on track 78. None of them knew where this track was located and Conductor Cornish, who was in direct charge of the movement, made no attempt to obtain definite information, in fact, about all that was done was to place the cars on an empty track and then proceed on their way with the balance of the train. The switch leading from the ladder track to track 38 was numbered, yet the head brakeman even failed to observe this number when he closed the switch.

The yardmaster said track 38 was bulletined to be kept clear at all times, such a bulletin could not be located, consequently it could not be ascertained whether there were any special instructions in this bulletin governing movements on this track. The investigation indicated that if any such bulletin had been issued it was at about the time the yard was established, many years ago. As operated today, however, track 38 is handled the same as any other yard track, except that it is supposed to be kept clear of cars, and movements over it are subject to the usual yard rules. While Engineman Kiley probably was fully aware that track 38 was a running track and should have been clear of cars, yet this did not relieve him of the obligation of keeping a proper lookout and having his train under full control, particularly in view of the unfavorable weather conditions existing.

While the failure of Engineman Kiley either to keep a proper lookout or to operate his train under full control was the immediate cause of this accident, it is believed that the greater share of the responsibility should be placed on Conductor Cornish, of train NY-10, for placing the cars on the running track instead of on track 78 as instructed.

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Both Conductor Cornish and Engineman Kiley were experienced men, while none of the employees involved had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. F. BORLAND

Director.