

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF  
SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH  
OCCURRED ON THE NORFOLK & WESTERN RAILWAY NEAR  
ASHLAND, W VA , ON APRIL 22, 1924

December 24, 1924

To the Commission:

A supplemental investigation has been made of the deraiment of a freight train on the Norfolk & Western Railway near Ashland, W Va , on April 22, 1924, which resulted in the death of two employees and one trespasser, and the injury of one employee

Summary of report of original investigation

The accident occurred on the North Fork Branch, a short single-track line serving coal mines in the vicinity of North Fork, W Va , the point of accident being a short distance west of Ashland. The track approaching from the west is a succession of short curves and tangents, the alignment immediately preceding the point of accident consisting of a 10° curve to the right 344 feet in length, 551 feet of tangent, and a 16° curve to the right 219 feet in length, the point of accident being approximately in the center of the last-mentioned curve. The grade is descending, being 1.5 per cent, then 3.15 per cent for some distance, and then 2.8 per cent at the point of accident.

The train involved consisted of 17 loaded coal cars, hauled by two engines, which were being operated backing up. The train got beyond control immediately after leaving the coal mine at the end of the branch and after travelling a distance of approximately 1 1/4 miles was derailed on the 16° curve while travelling at a speed variously estimated to have been from 40 to 60 miles an hour. Both engines and 14 cars were derailed, the cars being practically demolished.

The cars in this train had been standing on two different tracks at the mine and a brakeman said he inspected the first nine cars, coupled all of the air hose,

and then opened an angle cock on the rear of the ninth car receiving a strong exhaust. The two brakemen who dropped the other eight cars down the grade and coupled them to the first nine cars said that they coupled the air hose on those eight cars. After the two cuts were coupled together the only test made was to open an angle cock on the 17th car. Examination of the wreckage did not show any signs of overheating on any of the wheels, either under the engines or the cars, nor was anything found to indicate that the retaining valves had been turned up.

The investigation showed that the probable cause was the failure to have the air brakes in proper working order, while the engineer of the leading engine manipulated his brake valve in such a manner as to nullify what little braking force was available. The air brake rules in effect were adequate to cover the situation, and had they been obeyed the accident probably would not have occurred. The superintendent, however, stated that crews serving coal operations did not make regular air-brake inspections, only satisfying themselves that the air was working through the train and that the pistons responded when the angle cock at the rear of a train was opened.

The supplemental investigation was made for the purpose of ascertaining what steps had been taken toward remedying the practices which were disclosed in the original investigation.

#### Results of supplemental investigation

In the course of the supplemental investigation an interview was had with the general air brake inspector, in which he stated that he had instructed the engineer on mine runs operating on the branch on which the accident occurred, in the proper method of testing and handling air brakes on descending grades, while the superintendent stated that immediately following the occurrence of the accident all crews operating on that particular branch, as well as on other branches, were cautioned to see that the air brakes were tested, and in order that the matter might be followed up for the purpose of seeing that the instructions were obeyed, the subordinate supervising officials were told to make frequent observations and to report on the same to the superintendent; copies of such reports were furnished showing the results of observations made by trainmasters and road foremen of engines at various points on various dates.

It also appeared that the general air brake inspector had given 13 lectures on the Pocahontas Division between May 1 and June 4, discussing, among other things, the general proposition of air brake testing and operation in mountain territory

The crew involved in the accident at Ashland reports for duty at Eckman, there are also several local crews operating out of this point. No car inspection or repair forces are maintained at Eckman and the duty of making the proper air brake tests devolves upon the train crews. During the course of the supplemental investigation several trains were observed departing without an adequate air brake test having been made, while in some cases these trains were assembled from three or four different tracks and departed without any brake application having been made from the engines. With regard to one of these crews the superintendent stated that it operated between Eckman and Wilcoe, a distance of about 15 miles, doing a great deal of switching, but that instructions had been issued to see that this crew makes the proper air brake test.

It is also to be noted that in view of the fact that the crew operating on the North Fork Branch goes on duty at Eckman and performs practically all of its work on the North Fork Branch where there are no car inspectors, the members of the crew are working under such circumstances that they can not have an inspection or air brake test at either end of their run unless they perform those duties themselves.

#### Conclusions

As was stated in the original report, the air brakes are amply sufficient to provide for the operation of these trains in safety if the rules are enforced and obeyed. The supplemental investigation showed that the officials have been working on the matter, but in view of the fact that several trains were observed departing from the yard at Eckman without any adequate air brake test, it appears that the officials have not been successful in obtaining strict adherence to the rules. The necessity of knowing that the air brake system is in proper working order is too obvious to require comment and the most energetic measures should be taken toward seeing that proper air brake tests are made if the occurrence of a similar accident in the future is to be avoided.

Respectfully submitted

W P Borland,  
Director