

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
NORFOLK & WESTERN RAILWAY NEAR FRIES JUNCTION, VA.,
ON NOVEMBER 16, 1928

January 15, 1929

To the Commission.

On November 16, 1928, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Norfolk & Western Railway near Fries Junction, Va., resulting in the death of two passengers and one employee, and the injury of four passengers and four employees.

Location and method of operation

The portion of the Radford Division, where this accident occurred, extends from Pulaski, Va., to Galax, Va., a distance of 52.4 miles, and includes several short branches off from this line. The accident occurred on the Fries Branch, extending from Fries Junction westward to Fries, Va., a distance of 5.5 miles, this is a single-track branch line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, supplemented by the issuance of clearance cards and permissive cards by the agent-operator at Fries, when trains are ready to depart from Fries clearance cards are issued by the agent-operator without obtaining authority from the dispatcher, however, in the case of permissive cards such authority is required. On the Fries branch there are three scheduled train movements in each direction daily except Sunday, two first-class trains and one third-class train. These trains are operated between Pulaski and Galax on time-table schedules, and on separate schedules in each direction on the Fries Branch. The freight train involved was operated from Galax to Fries Junction as train No. 76. From Fries Junction to Fries a portion of this train was operated as train No. 77, and when the collision occurred it was returning from Fries to Fries Junction as train No. 78. The passenger train involved was operated from Galax to Fries Junction as train No. 48 and was backing up on the Fries Branch as train No. 57 when the collision occurred. The accident occurred at a point about 1 mile west of Fries Junction. In the vicinity

of the point of accident there are numerous short curves and tangents, approaching from the west the line is tangent for a distance of 914.2 feet, followed by a compound curve to the left 1,280.8 feet in length, with a maximum curvature of 3° , the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 68 feet from its eastern end where the curvature is 3° . Approaching from the east there is a 2° curve to the left 362.5 feet in length, then 457.5 feet of tangent, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is slightly descending for eastbound trains. Owing to a hill on the inside of the curve the view was considerably restricted.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 12.04 or 12.05 p.m.

Description

Eastbound freight train No. 78 consisted of one box car and a caboose, hauled by engine 7, and was in charge of Conductor Hall and Engineman Wills, a permissive card had been received at Galax. This train left Fries at 11.50 a.m., according to the train register, twenty-five minutes late, and after proceeding about $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 15 or 18 miles per hour it collided with train No. 57.

Westbound passenger train No. 57 consisted, from west to east, of two coaches, one express car, one combination car, all of wooden construction, and engine 74, headed east, and was in charge of Conductor Whitmire and Engineman Vier. This train left Fries Junction at about 12.02 p.m., three minutes ahead of time, and while making a back-up movement over the branch line, after having proceeded a distance of about 1 mile, it collided with train No. 78 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 15 or 18 miles per hour.

Engine 7 of train No. 78 was partly derailed and considerably damaged. The leading car in train No. 57 was completely telescoped and the adjacent car was badly damaged, both of these passenger cars were destroyed. The employee killed was the brakeman of train No. 57.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Wills, of train No. 78 stated that after work was completed at Fries, Conductor Hall asked him whether he could make Fries Junction for train No. 57, he replied that he thought so, but if not he could clear at Edwards siding, which is a stub-end industrial spur, 251 feet in length, located on the north side of the branch line, ~~about~~ about half a mile west of Fries Junction. Engineman Wills said train No. 78 departed from Fries at 11.48 a. m., and the air brakes were working properly. While rounding the curve approaching the point of accident, Fireman Walden shouted a warning of danger and Engineman Wills immediately applied the air brakes in emergency, reversed the engine, and was preparing to jump when the accident occurred, the point of accident being about half a mile west of the switch leading to Edwards siding. Engineman Wills stated that the accident occurred at 12.01 p.m. According to his statements it was exactly 12 o'clock noon when he looked at his watch just prior to the accident, while rounding the curve, he then decided to head in at Edwards siding for train No. 57 and said he was just preparing to sound the engine whistle signifying his intention of so doing when the fireman shouted the warning of danger.

Fireman Walden, of train No. 78, stated that when his train was ready to leave Fries he heard Conductor Hall ask Engineman Wills whether they could make Fries Junction for train No. 57 and the engineman said he would try and if it could not be done that he would head in at Edwards siding. While rounding the curve at a speed of about 18 miles per hour Fireman Walden saw the passenger train backing up, when it was about 25 car lengths distant, and he said at that time there was no one standing on the rear end of the leading car attending the back-up hose. He shouted a warning of danger and the engineman applied the air brakes, the collision occurring immediately afterwards. When he looked at his watch after the accident it was 12.03 p.m. Fireman Walden said that as long as he had worked on this branch line he had never before heard of a train meeting another at Edwards siding. The statements of Head Brakeman Brown brought out nothing additional of importance, he thought the time of the accident was about 12 o'clock noon.

Conductor Hall, of train No 73, who was seriously injured, said that he registered out of Fries at 11.50 a. m , but the train started to pull out at 11.47 a. m. He figured on making Fries Junction for train No. 57 but realized that it was going to be close. Approaching Edwards siding he started for the caboose door, in order to look across toward the line from Galax to see whether the passenger train was coming on the main line, saying that if he saw it he intended to send a flag ahead, or to head in at Edwards siding. He thought the time of the accident was not later than 12 01 p. m. Flagman Kegley stated that he had been on this particular run for about 14 years and during that time he did not know of any occasion when the freight train cleared the passenger train at Edwards siding.

Conductor Whitmire, of train No. 57, stated that his train arrived at Fries Junction at 12.01 p. m. After giving the engineman a back-up signal he looked at his watch and it was then 12 03 p. m. Conductor Whitmire stated he observed that Brakeman Manuel was in proper position to attend the back-up hose at the rear end of the leading car and then went into the adjacent car. He was unaware of anything wrong until the accident occurred, he fixed the time of the accident at 12.07 p. m. The air brakes were tested and worked properly, he did not notice any air brake application made immediately prior to the accident. Conductor Whitmire could not recall having ever left Fries Junction ahead of time before, and said that on this occasion he made no mention to Brakeman Manuel of the fact that the train was leaving ahead of time.

Engineman Vier, of train No. 57, stated that his train arrived at Fries Junction at 12.03 p. m. and that it was about one minute later when he received a back-up signal, by means of the conductor's communicating whistle signal. On looking at his watch it was 12.04 p. m. The train was backed at a speed of about 15 miles per hour. Shortly afterwards the fireman shouted a warning of danger and he immediately applied the air brakes, the collision occurring at about the same time. Engineman Vier fixed the time of the accident as about 12 08 p. m. He could recall of no other instance of having left ahead of time. He did not detect any air brake application made prior to the accident from the rear of the train by means of the back-up hose. The statements of Fireman Suirett were practically the same as those of Engineman Vier.

Agent-Operator Spangler, stationed at Fries, stated that the freight train involved arrived at Fries at 11.40 a. m. and departed at 11.50 a. m. on the return trip. He was positive that these were the correct times as taken from the clock in the station, which was not more than 30 seconds fast when standard time was sent out that day. He said that before this train departed from Fries he asked Conductor Hall twice whether he was going to try to make Fries Junction for train No. 57. The conductor took out his watch and said that train No. 57 was due at Fries Junction at 12.05 p. m. and that he had time to make it, no mention was made of Edwards siding.

At the time of the accident Section Foreman Vaught was about 300 feet east of where it occurred. He observed train No. 57 approaching, backing up at a speed between 15 and 20 miles per hour, as it was his usual practice to go to lunch at 12 o'clock noon and knowing that that train was not due to leave Fries Junction until 12.05 p. m., he immediately looked at his watch. He said that the hands were right together and that it might have been 12 noon or 12.01 p. m. Shortly afterwards he heard the crash of the collision. A comparison of his watch with that of the division superintendent the following morning showed the section foreman's watch to be 3 minutes and 25 seconds slow. He stated that when train No. 57 passed him a former employee of the railroad company, who was a passenger on this trip, was operating the whistle attached to the back-up nose, he did not know whether there was anyone else on the rear platform.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by train No. 78 occupying the main track on the time of a superior train without protection, and by train No. 57 departing from a station ahead of schedule time, for which the conductors and enginemen of the two trains involved are primarily responsible.

The following provisions of the rules were not complied with in this case:

87 "An inferior train must keep out of the way of opposing superior trains and failing to clear the main track by the time required by rule must be protected as prescribed by Rule 99 . . . "

89 "At meeting points between trains of different classes the inferior train must take the siding and clear the superior train at least five minutes . "

89 (a) "When a train turns out at a siding where no time is shown, to be passed by a superior train, it must clear the time of the superior train as shown at the first station ahead or back."

92 " .A train must not leave a station in advance of its scheduled leaving time."

There was some discrepancy in the statements of various employees involved concerning the time at which this accident occurred but the weight of evidence fixes this time at about 12.04 or 12.05 p. m. It is clearly established that train No. 73 departed from Fries in an attempt to reach Fries Junction before the departure of train No. 57 from that point when the time was too short to permit it to reach that point and clear as required by rule, and that train No. 57 departed from Fries Junction ahead of its scheduled leaving time, the accident occurring at about the time this train was due to leave Fries Junction. Had the requirements of the rules been observed this accident would not have occurred.

The investigation disclosed certain lax methods and practices in the operation of trains on this line, in connection with the registering of trains and reporting their arrival and departure, and in this instance a passenger had taken the place of the brakeman who was stationed on the rear platform of the passenger train, while backing up, to operate the back-up hose and maintain a look-out of the track ahead. On this portion of the line the traffic is light, but the non-observance of rules and other improper operating practices disclosed by this investigation resulted in a dangerous condition which requires attention and corrective action by supervising officials.

All of the employees involved in this accident were experienced men and none of them was on duty contrary to the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND

Director.