

## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE  
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE  
NORTHERN ALABAMA RAILWAY, SOUTHERN RAILWAY SYSTEM,  
AT GAMBLE, ALA., ON APRIL 25, 1926.

May 11, 1926.

To the Commission:

On April 25, 1926, there was a head-end collision between two Illinois Central Railroad passenger trains being operated over the track of the Northern Alabama Railway, Southern Railway System, at Gamble, Ala., resulting in the death of 2 employees, and the injury of 75 passengers, 1 mail clerk, 1 express messenger, 1 Pullman employee, and 10 railroad employees.

Location and method of operation

The Northern Alabama Railway extends between Sheffield and Parrish, Ala., a distance of 95.6 miles; it is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred on the main track, on a fill about 10 feet in height, between the switches of the southbound passing track at Gamble, at a point 1,239 feet south of the north switch; the southbound passing track is 3,304.5 feet in length, and parallels the main track on the east. Approaching the point of accident from the north the track is tangent for a distance of 2,269.4 feet, followed by a 4° curve to the right 1,527 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 1,048.9 feet from its northern end. Approaching from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 533 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is 0.777 per cent ascending at the point of accident for northbound trains. From the engineman's side of a southbound engine a view of the point of collision can be had for a distance of 940 feet, while on account of the curve the view from the engineman's side of a northbound engine is obstructed by the forward part of the engine.

Trains of the Illinois Central Railroad operate over the track of the Northern Alabama Railway between Haleyville and Jasper, 34.5 miles north and 5.8 miles south of Gamble, respectively. Both trains involved were of the same class and were manned by crews of the Illinois Central Railroad; the rules and regulations of the Southern Railway apply in joint track territory. Under special instructions in the current time-table all regular northbound trains are superior to trains of the same class moving in the opposite direction.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 3.08 p.m.

#### Description

Southbound passenger train first No. 9 consisted of one mail car, one express car, one baggage car, two coaches, one Pullman car, one dining car, and six Pullman cars, in the order named, of all-steel construction, hauled by engine 2416, and was in charge of Conductor Elackmon and Engineman Boone. At Haleyville the crew received a copy of train order No. 212, Form 31, reading in part as follows:

"First \*\*\*No. 10 ten Eng 2417  
meet first No. 9 nine Eng 2416  
at Gamble \*\*\*"

Train first No. 9 departed from Haleyville at 1.05 p.m., 15 minutes late, and passed Prospect, the last open office and 6.8 miles north of Gamble, at 1.58 p.m., 7 minutes late. On reaching Gamble, however, instead of heading in at the north switch of the southbound passing track, train first No. 9, the inferior train by direction, continued on the main track and on reaching a point 1,233 feet south of the north switch, while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 12 and 25 miles an hour, collided with train first No. 10.

Northbound passenger train first No. 10 consisted of one mail car, one express car, one baggage car, two coaches, four Pullman cars, one dining car, and three Pullman cars, in the order named, of all-steel construction, hauled by engine 2417, and was in charge of Conductor Kennedy and Engineman Coppedge. At Jasper the crew received among others a copy of train order No. 212, Form 31, previously referred to, departing from this point at 1.45 p.m., 25 minutes late. On arrival at Gamble at 2.05 p.m., a copy of train order No. 212, Form 19, was again delivered to the crew, as a middle order, the telegraph office at this point being located 218.8 feet north of the south switch of the southbound passing track, and the train continued northward on the main track; on reaching a point 2,065.5 feet north of the south switch, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 4 and 10 miles an hour, it collided with train first No. 9.

Engine 2416, of train first No. 9, together with its tender, turned over to the left; only one pair of wheels under the mail car was derailed, while the second and third cars telescoped each other to some extent. Engine 2417, of train first No. 10, was only partly derailed, but the boiler was torn from the frame and thrown to the right on to the passing track; the tender was not derailed, nor was any material damage suffered by any of the cars in this train. The employees killed were the engineman and

fireman of train first No. 9

### Summary of evidence

Conductor Blackman, of train first No. 9, stated that before he handed train order No. 212 to Engineman Doone at Haleyville, the engineman inquired where they were to meet train first No. 10; the conductor replied that they would meet at Gamble, adding that "we take siding", and then delivered the order to the engineman, who was standing on the deck of the engine. He said Engineman Doone read the order back to him, in the presence of Operator Martin and that he also receipted for the order on the conductor's copy of the clearance card. After the train departed Conductor Blackmon said that he not only informed Train Porter Barnett of the contents of train order No. 212 but also gave him the order to read, and that the train porter in turn carried it to the rear of the train for Flagman Johnson to read; after the flagman read the order the train porter brought it back to Baggage-master Troutt, who also read it. Conductor Blackmon said that as the train approached Gamble the engineman sounded the station whistle signal, and Train Porter Barnett, who was riding with the conductor in the fourth car, at once sounded the meeting point signal on the communicating signal cord, which in turn was answered by the engineman by two blasts on the engine whistle. Conductor Blackmon said that in view of this he assumed that Engineman Doone understood their train should head in at the north switch; the conductor said that when he realized that such was not the case he at once pulled the conductor's emergency valve, the collision occurring immediately afterwards. Flagman Johnson, Express Messenger West, and Train Porter Barnett corroborated in substance the statements of Conductor Blackmon, except that the train porter said he did not hear the engineman acknowledge the meeting point signal. Baggage-master Troutt stated that after the meeting-point whistle-signal was sounded, a light air-brake application was made; he then went back into the car in which the conductor was riding, for the purpose of getting a drink of water, noticed that the train was continuing on the main track and called it to the attention of the conductor, who immediately applied the air brakes by means of the conductor's emergency valve. He also said that he heard the engineman acknowledge the meeting point signal.

Engineman Coppedge, of train first No. 10, stated that after receiving the middle order by hoop at Gamble his train continued on the main track toward the north switch and that he was working a light throttle while rounding the curve. On nearing the center of the passing track Engineman Coppedge, being on the outside of the curve, asked Fireman Ganner whether or not he saw train first No. 9 approaching and after looking the fireman said he thought

that it was approaching on the main track instead of heading in at the north switch. On definitely realizing that such was the case Engineman Coppedge applied the air brakes in emergency and he and the fireman jumped just prior to the occurrence of the accident. After the accident Engineman Coppedge went to the assistance of Engineman Boone, and he said that before he died Engineman Boone said, "I didn't make any mistake. My order did not direct me to take the siding." Engineman Coppedge further stated that there was nothing confusing about the contents of train order No. 212, but that for the past five or six months train No. 10 had been instructed by train order to take the siding for train No. 9, practically every day; on this particular occasion train order No. 212 contained no instructions as to which train should take the siding, therefore, under the special instructions contained in the current time-table train first No. 9, being inferior by direction, should have headed in at the north switch. He thought that the accident was the result of the fact that Engineman Boone was accustomed to holding the main track at the meeting point, and that consequently he overlooked the requirements of the time-table instructions. The statements of Fireman Garner corroborated in substance those of Engineman Coppedge; he also said that it was practically impossible to determine definitely which track an opposing train was occupying while rounding the curve. Conductor Kennedy, Baggage-master Robertson, Flagman Ligon, and Train Porter McCullar, of train first No. 10, were unaware of anything wrong prior to the accident.

Operator Martin, stationed at Haleyville, stated that he heard Conductor Blackmon inform Engineman Boone, of train first No. 9, before departing from Haleyville that "we meet them at Gamble, and we take the siding."

Dispatcher Chandler stated <sup>that</sup> during the winter the traffic conditions were such that train No. 9 was given preference, particularly when the two trains were meeting at Prospect, 6.8 miles from Gamble, Prospect being their time-table meeting point. A check of the train sheet showed that in the first 23 days of April, train first No. 10, the superior train, had taken siding on 19 occasions.

#### Conclusions

This accident was caused by failure of train No. 9 to take siding, as required by the meet order with train No. 10, for which Engineman Boone and Conductor Blackmon are responsible.

Under special instructions in the current time-table, all regular northbound trains are superior to trains of the same class moving in the opposite direction, and in

the absence of instructions to the contrary train first No. 9 should have headed in at the north switch of the passing track. It appeared, however, that for some time past it had been the practice to instruct the crew of train No. 10 to take siding for train No. 9, and Engineman Doone may have overlooked the fact that on this occasion the timetable rights of the two trains had not been reversed.

The evidence further indicated that the conductor delegated to the colored train porter the duty of sounding the meeting point signal, and that the conductor continued with his work of sorting tickets until the car in which he was riding, the fourth car, had passed the switch at which the train should have entered the passing track; it was then too late to avert the accident. This accident is but one of several which have occurred during the past year in which the colored train porter not only was performing duties which should have been performed by the conductor, but in which the train porter apparently was more interested in the safe operation of the train. The case at hand affords a good illustration of the results of such a situation. Had Conductor Blackmon been paying proper attention to the operation of his train, stationing himself where he could observe what was transpiring, there is no reason why he could not have applied the air brakes by the time the engine reached the passing track switch, in which event the accident probably would not have occurred. For his lack of interest in seeing that the next order was properly obeyed, Conductor Blackmon is equally responsible with Engineman Doone for the occurrence of this accident.

Had an adequate block-signal system been in use on this line, this accident probably would not have occurred; an adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented it.

All of the employees involved were experienced men. At the time of the accident the crew of train first No. 9 had been on duty about 5½ hours, and the crew of train first No. 10 nearly 3 hours, previous to which they had been off duty 13 hours or more.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,  
Director.