

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN
RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD NEAR PIERRON, ILL., ON
MARCH 13, 1926.

May 4, 1926.

To the Commission:

On March 13, 1926, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the Pennsylvania Railroad near Pierron, Ill., which resulted in the death of three employees, and the injury of six mail clerks, two passengers, one express messenger and one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the St. Louis Division, which extends between Indianapolis, Ind., and St. Louis, Mo., a distance of 241.8 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. At a point between Pocahontas and Pierron a section of new main track approximately 2,900 feet in length had been placed in service, the new track being on the south side of the old main track. There was no switch at the eastern end of the new section, the connection with the old main track at that point having been broken, but at the western end of the new section there was a sharp curve to the right where there was a switch joining the new track with the old track. The accident occurred at this switch, which was located approximately $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles east of Pierron. Approaching this point on the section of new track, beginning at its eastern end, there were several short curves and tangents, each of the curves being of 45' curvature, followed by a 1° curve to the left 540 feet in length, 78 feet of tangent, and then the curve of the switch connecting with the old main track, with a curvature of $7^{\circ}22'$. The grade is slightly ascending and then it is about 0.45 per cent descending for a distance of about 1,200 feet to the beginning of the curve at the switch. The section of new track is laid with 100-pound rails, 33 feet in length, with 22 treated ties to the rail-length, tie plated and single-spiked, and is ballasted with about 2 feet of gravel.

At a point about 2,500 feet distant from each end of the new section of track, on the engine-man's side, there was located a slow board, each board being equipped with a yellow light, while ~~resume-speed~~ boards were located just beyond the ends of the section of new main track, each of these being equipped with a green light; in addition, general order No. 238 was issued under date of March 10, 1926, advising that the new section of track would be placed in service at 10 a.m. March 12 and providing for a speed limit of 10 miles an hour throughout its length.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 5.55 a.m.

Description

Westbound passenger train No. 13 consisted of one express car, two mail cars, one express car, three mail cars, two express cars, one coach and one Pullman sleeping car, in the order named, hauled by engines 1301 and 8707, and was in charge of Conductor Mainard and Enginemen Bennett and Hackett. All the cars were of steel construction with the exception of the first car, which was of wooden construction. This train left Terre Haute, Ind., at 2.50 a.m., according to the train sheet, 43 minutes late, passed Pocahontas, about $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles east of the point of accident, at 5.45 a.m., 33 minutes late, entered upon the section of new track and was derailed at the switch at the western or leaving end of the new track while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 35 and 45 miles an hour.

Both engines were derailed to the right and came to rest on their sides with the head end of the first engine 346 feet beyond the point of derailment and 48 feet from the center of the track. The first seven cars of the train were also derailed and considerably damaged. The employees killed were the engineman of the second engine and both of the firemen .

Summary of evidence

Engineman Bennett, of engine 1301, stated that he went on duty at 1.22 a.m. March 13, and at the time he registered for duty at Terre Haute Union Station he did not have his time-table with him, it being in his overalls which were hanging in the wash room. At this time he wrote on the register in the column provided for that purpose that the last general order he had received was general order No. 238, seeing on the register that this was the last general order other enginemen, who had registered prior to him had receipted for, and being of the impression he had already received a copy of it he did not deem it necessary to get another copy, as a matter of fact, however, he had not received a copy of general order No. 238 and knew nothing of its contents. After registering he went to the wash room to change his clothes and then started for the telegraph office for the purpose of examining the bulletin board. He saw train No. 13 entering the station, however, and at once followed it to the western end of the platform, forgetting to go to the telegraph office, the result was that he did not exhibit his time-table to the operator, with the general orders pasted in the back of it, as was required by the rules. Engineman Bennett further stated that as his train approached the section of new main track he did not see the slow board, nor did the fireman call it to his attention, the train entering on the new track before he realized it. He took no action toward reducing the speed, however, as the track rode so smoothly as to cause him to think it was in safe condition for the speed at which his train was running. Just before reaching the western end of the section of new track the rays of the headlight of his engine shone on the sharp curve leading to the switch and he said he then realized the train was moving too rapidly to pass around the curve in safety and at once applied the air brakes in emergency. Engineman Bennett said the train was traveling at a high rate of speed before he made the emergency air-brake application, but estimated the speed to have been reduced to about 20 or 25 miles an hour by the time the train reached the switch. After the accident he said to his fireman, who subsequently died, "it is a wonder they didn't put out a slow order on that

new piece of track" and the fireman replied, "didn't you get the last two general orders, Nos. 237 and 238?" to which Engineman Bennett replied "no". Engineman Bennett further stated that although the rules require it, yet it was not the practice to exhibit time-tables to the operator.

Conductor Mainard, who had received a copy of general order No. 338, stated that when approaching the point of accident he was riding in the tenth car, on the south side, but the train was on the new main track before he realized it, traveling at a high rate of speed. He then considered pulling the emergency cord, but the accident occurred just as he started to turn around in his seat, at which time he estimated the speed to have been between 35 and 40 miles an hour. He had not looked for the slow board, as he said it was almost impossible to see them at night from the cars of a moving train and furthermore he had implicit confidence that the two enginemen, who had worked with him for years and were considered to be very reliable, would attend to that duty and reduce speed accordingly. Conductor Mainard stated that although the rules require it, and he had been told to do so, yet at no time did he recall having exhibited his time-table to the operator at Terre Haute; it was his practice to check the bulletin board and in the event there were general orders posted which he did not have he would secure copy in sticker form, together with a receipt card, and then would personally apply the sticker form to his time-table.

Baggageman Thompson stated that he had not seen general order No. 238 and knew nothing whatever of the 10-miles-an-hour speed restriction over the new main track. While the train was rounding the curve, moving at a speed of about 50 miles an hour, he had looked out of the coach to inspect the train, and noticing nothing wrong he closed the trap door in the vestibule and then walked back inside the coach, at which time the accident occurred. He said the air brakes were not applied prior to the accident, and estimated the speed to have been between 35 and 40 miles an hour at the time it occurred. He had a time-table and said that as a general rule he observed the bulletin board for general orders, but that he did not do so on this occasion, he did not see the slow-speed board while rounding the curve as he was on the south side of the train.

Flagman Arbuckle stated that he was aware of the contents of general order No. 238, had his time-table up to date, and knew where the new section of main track was located; approaching this point he was preparing to go out on the rear platform and had his hand on the door knob, ready to open the door, thinking the train was getting close to the new track, when the derailment occurred. He estimated the speed to have been about 35 miles an hour just prior to the accident and did not recall any air-brake application having been made. He understood that it was his duty to be out on the rear end of the train when passing over the new track and that when the train passed the resume-speed board he was to transmit a proceed signal to the engineman.

Several witnesses testified that the lights on the slow and resume-speed boards, and also on the high switch stand, were burning properly just prior to the accident, while Engineman Godfrey and Fireman Palmer, of train No. 345, which was following train No. 13, stated that the yellow light on the slow board was burning properly and could be seen plainly a distance of about one-half mile.

Bulletin No. 61, issued over the signature of Road Foreman of Engines Fiddle under date of September 23, 1924, related to running engines through between Indianapolis and St. Louis. That bulletin contained the following provision with respect to passenger engine crews reporting for duty at Terre Haute, an intermediate point:

"Enginemen and firemen will report to, receive their time slips and sign register at the office of the Station Master in the Union Station and will check General Orders and present their time table to the Operator in 'DS' Telegraph Office for approval and the posting of such General Orders as may be necessary."

Operator Sebree, third-trick operator at "DS" office, stated, however, that it was not the practice for employees to show their time-tables to him and that he had not applied the sticker form of a general order in an employee's time-table for a period of about six months. When enginemen went

out on the road he did not know whether or not they had current general orders, as after the general orders were received and posted on the bulletin board the sticker forms, to ether with the receipt cards were placed on the counter and the employees would take the general orders themselves and sign the cards. At the time the general-order distribution method was first inaugurated the employees exhibited their time-tables, but on numerous occasions he would have to keep them waiting and they would grow impatient, resulting in the fact that they gradually deviated from the requirements of the rules and as a consequence the present practice arose.

Fireman Barnett, of train No. 88, stated that he was in the telegraph office at Terre Haute Union Station at the time Engineman Hackett, of the second engine of train No. 13, registered and the engineman remarked to him that he would leave it up to the engineman of the lead engine to look out for the new main track mentioned in general order No. 238. Later he picked up Engineman Hackett's signed receipt card for general order No. 238, which was laying on the counter, and deposited it in the box provided for that purpose.

After the accident Engineman Hackett's time-table was found near his body, but the sticker form of general order No. 238 was not in the time-table, it was found, however, in his hand bag fastened to his time slip in the side pocket of his coat.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Bennett, of the lead engine of train No. 13, to obey general order No. 238 restricting speed to 10 miles an hour over the section of new main track on which the accident occurred, and his failure to observe and be governed by the indication of the slow-speed board located immediately east of the new track. Engineman Bennett had not received a copy of general order No. 238, but Engineman Hackett, in charge of the second engine, had received a copy of the order and is at fault for his failure to apply the air brakes when he saw that the requirements of the order and also of the slow-speed board were being ignored by Engineman Bennett. An added factor of material

importance was the fact that the rules governing the system established for the purpose of knowing that employees are in possession of all general orders were not enforced by the officials nor obeyed by the employees.

At the time Engineman Bennett was interviewed in the hospital he was not in a condition which would permit of close questioning and no satisfactory reason was developed for his failure to observe the slow-speed board when approaching the section of new main track. It did appear, however, that when registering for duty he saw that general order No. 238 was shown as the last general order received by other employees who had registered before him and he was of the impression that he had already received a copy of this order and therefore so indicated on the register. It was known that Engineman Bennett was involved in domestic troubles, and he was asked if this did not contribute to his failure to perform his duty, but he denied that such was the case, saying that train No. 13 pulled into the station just as he was starting toward the telegraph office for the purpose of examining the bulletin board, and that he then overlooked the matter entirely, proceeding at once to the engine. Engineman Hackett, however, had received a copy of the order and it is impossible to state why he failed to obey its requirements or to observe the slow-speed board when approaching the section of new track.

In addition to the bulletin issued by the road foreman of engines, previously referred to, rule 75 of the book of rules of the operating department requires conductors and engineers to exhibit their time-tables when reporting for duty, while under the special instructions in the time-table employees whose duties are affected by time-tables must have with them while on duty a copy with all effective supplements properly inserted. The rules were adequate to cover the situation had they been either enforced by the officials or obeyed by the employees. The evidence indicated, however, that for several months it had been customary to leave to the men themselves the duty of keeping properly posted as to the issuance of general orders, in other words the system existed only in name and not in fact. The failure of the system to function apparently does not affect the status of Engineman Hackett, but it presents an ample explanation as to why

Engineman Bennett's forgetfulness went unchecked, finally resulting in the occurrence of this accident. Habitual nonobservance of rules has been the subject of criticism in previous reports and it is only necessary to suggest that rules which are not to be enforced should be eliminated from the book of rules.

All the employees involved were experienced men; at the time of the accident both engine crews had been on duty less than 4 hours, and the train crew less than 8 hours, previous to which all of these employees had been off duty 26 hours or more.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.