

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD AT WILMINGTON, DEL., ON AUGUST 31, 1925.

December 23, 1925.

To the Commission:

On August 31, 1925, there was a collision between two portions of a shop employees' train on the Pennsylvania Railroad at Wilmington, Del., resulting in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

The accident occurred on the Maryland Division, within the limits of Third Street Yard at Wilmington. A track known as the incline track extends from west to east, and track 4, on which the accident occurred leads gradually from this track toward the northwest, the switch being located 127 feet east of the point of accident. A traction line crosses track 4 at a point 133 feet west of the point of accident on what is known as East 4th Street. The incline track is tangent and the grade is 1.86 per cent descending toward the west.

It was daylight and the weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 5.35 a.m.

Description

The shop employees' train consisted of eight coaches, hauled by engine 1636, backing up, and was in charge of Conductor Gray and Engineer Ostendarp. This train was brought to a stop on the incline track just east of the switch leading to track 4, after which the engine was uncoupled from the cars at a point 59 feet east of the switch and backed in on track 4, it being intended to close the switch between the engine and cars as they dropped down the grade on the incline track, the switch was not closed, however, and the cars followed the engine in on track 4, traveling at a speed of about 6 miles an hour, and collided with the engine, which had been brought to a stop.

The front platform of the first coach was broken off and one pair of wheels derailed, the head end of the engine was slightly damaged. The employee killed was a brakeman who was riding on the front platform of the first car.

Summary of evidence

After coming to a stop on the incline track, just east of the switch leading to track 4, Brakeman Venable was assigned to operate the switch, while Brakeman Smith was stationed at the front end of the first coach to operate the hand brake, while Conductor Gray took up a position on the second coach to help Brakeman Smith bring the cars to a stop after they had dropped by the switch. Shortly afterwards Brakeman Venable uncoupled the engine, then went to the switch and gave a back-up signal, and Fireman Jewell, who was operating the engine under the supervision of Engineman Ostendarp, backed the engine in on track 4. Engineman Ostendarp saw the crossing gates being raised, told the fireman to go slowly and then looked to see whether or not Brakeman Venable closed the switch between the engine and cars. Seeing that he had not done so, the engineman instructed Fireman Jewell to continue backing up, and on again looking westward he saw a street car on East 4th Street starting across the track moving at a low rate of speed and told Fireman Jewell to bring the engine to a stop; the engine was brought to a stop with the rear end of the tender about an engine length from the street-car track, the front end of the engine being struck by the draft of cars immediately afterwards. Engineman Ostendarp said the engine had been backed away from the cars at the usual rate of speed and that the cars were about 20 feet from the engine the last time he looked at them, a sufficient distance for Brakeman Venable to have closed the switch between them. On account of his position Fireman Jewell could not see what was taking place and was operating the engine in accordance with signals as transmitted to him by the engineman.

Brakeman Venable said he was instructed by Conductor Gray to arrange with the crossing watchman for the lowering of the gates, protecting East 4th Street and also Church Street, that he did as instructed, and that before uncoupling the engine he noticed that some of the gates had been lowered. According to Brakeman Venable, after the engine backed in on track 4 there was sufficient time for him to have closed the switch but that had he closed it behind the engine the cars would have cornered the engine, which in his opinion moved away from the cars too slowly. He stated that he warned Brakeman Smith, who was killed, to get off or step inside the coach and that there was ample time for him to have done either

prior to the accident Brakeman Venable was of the opinion that the accident was caused by the engine moving away from the cars at too low a rate of speed and then stopping on seeing the street car start across the East 4th Street crossing. Engineman Ostendarp agreed with Brakeman Venable's statement that had the switch been closed the cars might have cornered the engine, while Fireman Jewell said he had heard Brakeman Venable telling some one to lower the crossing gates.

Conductor Gray stated that the movement in question was a regular one, practically of daily occurrence, and was made for the purpose of placing the engine at the opposite end of the train in order to have it headed properly before departing with the train at 5.59 a.m. He issued the necessary instructions covering the movement to be made, assisted one of the brakemen in bleeding the air from the brake cylinders, and was trying out the hand brake on the second coach, preparatory to assisting Brakeman Smith in controlling the coaches on the descending grade, when he heard Brakeman Venable shout to Brakeman Smith to get off or step inside, he looked ahead and saw that the cars were going to collide with the engine barely having time to jump before the accident occurred. He estimated the speed of the cars to have been about 6 miles an hour at the time of the accident, and said that when the cars collided with the engine, the engine was in on track 4 a sufficient distance to clear the coaches had the switch been closed.

There was a crossing watchman and also a gate tender on duty at the crossing just west of the point of accident. Both of these men stated that they had seen the shop train when it reached the switch leading to track 4, but that no member of the crew came to the crossing to arrange for the lowering of the gates. When the engine bell began to ring, however, they lowered the gates protecting Church Street, which crosses track 4 practically at the point where the accident occurred, but there was a street car approaching on East 4th Street, approximately 100 feet farther west, and when the collision occurred between the engine and the draft of cars this street car was on the crossing. According to the statements of these men, the crossing gates on East 4th Street had not been lowered at any time immediately prior to the occurrence of the accident.

After the accident the switch was found to be in proper working order, while the hand brakes on the cars were efficient. It was also ascertained that the point of accident was more than 20 feet beyond the clearance point of the switch.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Brakeman Venable to close the switch leading to track No. 4, resulting in the cars entering the switch and colliding with the engine instead of coming down by the engine on the incline track.

The movement in question was a regular one, of practically daily occurrence, and was thoroughly understood by all concerned. Brakeman Venable admitted that there was sufficient time for him to have closed the switch between the engine and cars on this occasion but was of the opinion that had he done so the cars would have cornered the engine. The engineman also thought an accident of this character might have resulted, but that this would not have been the case was evident from the fact that the accident occurred at a point more than 20 feet beyond the clearance point.

While the measurements made afterwards indicated that the cars would not have cornered the engine, the statements of the engineman and brakeman show that there may reasonably have been some doubt about the matter at the time these events were happening. It was clear that the gates protecting the crossing on East 4th Street were not down at the time the engine was moving toward the crossing on track 4, that this was noticed by the engine crew, and that the engine was brought to a stop more quickly than usual in order to avoid striking a street car, it was not determined, however, to what extent if any this phase of the situation influenced the action of Brakeman Venable in leaving the switch open, although it was apparent that at the time the cars entered the switch he had not seen the street car and did not know that the engine would have to make a sudden stop after getting clear of the switch.

The misunderstanding that developed between the crew and the crossing watchman, and also the gaterman as to the lowering of the gates might easily have resulted in a much more serious accident. As it was, while it appears that the cars would not have cornered the engine had Brakeman Venable closed the switch, yet it is possible the cars would then have proceeded toward the crossing on the incline track and would have collided with the street car. Conductor Gray seemed to have given instructions for the gates to be lowered, which instructions were not carried out by all concerned, Conductor Gray was in charge of the movement being made and should have placed himself in position to see that his instructions were carried out and that the crossing was fully protected, until the movement had been completed.

All of the employees involved were experienced men, and at the time of the accident none of them had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BOPLAND

Director.