

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED
ON THE SEABOARD AIR LINE AT RICEBORO, GEORGIA,
ON FEBRUARY 13, 1918.

March 21, 1918.

On February 13, 1918, there was a head-end collision between a passenger and a freight train on the Seaboard Air Line Railway at Riceboro, Georgia, resulting in the death of two employees and injuries to nine employees and three passengers. After an investigation of the nature and cause of this accident the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

The Jacksonville District of the South Carolina Division, upon which the accident occurred, is a single-track line extending between Savannah, Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida. In the vicinity of the accident the track extends north and south, is straight for several miles in each direction, and the grade is practically level. The right-of-way is wide, and approaching Riceboro from the north there is nothing to obstruct the view of persons riding on the locomotive. Trains are operated by time table and train orders, no block signal system being used.

The trains involved in this accident were southbound passenger train No. 1, known as the Florida-Cape Special, which operates between Washington, D. C., and Jacksonville, Florida, and First No. 80, a northbound perishable freight train running from Jacksonville, Florida, to Savannah, Georgia.

Train No. 1, at the time of this accident, was in charge of Conductor Emery and Engineman Rogers, and consisted of an engine, 3 express cars, mail car, combination baggage and coach, a coach, a dining car and 2 Pullman sleepers. All of these cars were of steel construction, except one of the express cars which was wood with steel underframe.

Train First No. 80 was in charge of Conductor Adams and Engineman Atkins, and consisted of a locomotive, 39 freight cars and a caboose.

The locomotive on each of these trains was equipped with a high power electric headlight. The engine and cars of train No. 1 were equipped with high speed air brakes, operating satisfactorily. The weather at the time the accident occurred was warm, dark, and clear, with visional conditions very good.

Approaching Riceboro station from the north about 5,000 feet distant is the trestle over Riceboro Creek; 1,400 feet south of the trestle is the crossing of the Dunlevy Lumber

Company's logging railroad, which is governed by an interlocking plant; 1,500 feet south of this crossing is the north switch of Riceboro passing track. The depot is 2,200 feet south of this switch and the water station is about 200 feet south of the depot. The passing track is on the east and the depot and water station are on the west side of the main track. There are two road crossings between the north switch and the depot, one located about 200 feet and one about 1,100 feet north of the depot. The collision occurred about 80 feet south of the clearing post on the north end of the passing track.

The north switch leading to the passing track is operated with a New Century Stand, located on the west side of the track. The position of the switch is indicated by a banner signal and a light located on top of the switch-mast, which is 7 feet 1-1/2 inches in height. The color indications are red and white. The lamp of the switch stand burns continuously when in proper condition and the reservoir is supposed to have a capacity sufficient to provide an eight day supply of oil. A bulletin order governing the care of switch lights provides that they shall be filled on Saturday and inspected Wednesdays and Saturdays of each week. The care of the switch lights is incumbent on section foremen, who are required to give it their personal attention.

On the day of the accident train No. 1 left Savannah at 5.21 p.m., one hour and fifty minutes late, with an order to wait at Dorchester until 6.05 p.m., and at Riceboro until 6.10 p.m., for first No. 80, engine 629. No. 1 passed Borroughs, the last open telegraph station north of and 20.5 miles distant from Riceboro, at 5.45 p.m., one hour and fifty-three minutes late, and passed Dorchester at 6.08 p.m., three minutes late on their wait order. Proceeding southward, No. 1 arrived at Riceboro at about 6.12 p.m., and on account of the passing track switch having been left open collided with first No. 80, standing on the north end of Riceboro passing track, while running at a speed estimated to have been 25 miles per hour.

Train First No. 80 passed Warsaw, the last open telegraph station south of Riceboro, at 5.20 p.m., with an order to meet No. 23 at Riceboro, allowing No. 23 to pull by and back in. The crew also had the order regarding train No. 1 previously referred to. After meeting No. 23 and taking water at Riceboro, First No. 80 did not have time to reach Dorchester by 6.10 p.m., and for this reason pulled up and backed in on the north end of Riceboro passing track about 6.03 p.m. After having backed in, the main track switch was not closed and about ten minutes after having stopped into clear the train was struck by No. 1 as stated above.

As a result of the collision the engine and train of First No. 80 were forced backward about eighty feet. The two locomotives partially telescoped, both tenders were forced upward, tearing away the cabs, and demolishing the tenders. Both locomotives were badly damaged and the two cars of train First No. 80 were practically destroyed.

Express car 327, which was the head car of train No. 1, was torn from its trucks and came to rest upright to the east side of the passing track. The forward end of this car was badly bent in from contact with the cistern of the tender of engine 655. Express car 493, which was of wooden construction, came to rest on the east side of the siding at right angles with the track and was so badly damaged that it was burned up. Express car 300 came to rest parallel with 493 partly on its side. Mail car 150 was at right angles and lying across both the siding and main track with but little damage except to the running gear. The trucks of all the cars were bunched together under the wreckage. Combination car 269 was partly turned over to the left parallel with the track and coach 594 was derailed but remained upright on the roadbed. The remaining cars of the train remained in position on the track and were not damaged.

The switch, frog and turnout were not damaged, the first damage to the track commencing at a point 30 feet from the frog, from which point the track was torn up, due to bunching of trucks under the wreckage.

Engineman Adkins of train First No. 80 stated that after taking water he and Conductor Adams decided to back in on the north Riceboro siding for No. 1, and that Flagmen Dempsey, who was at the head end of the train, was instructed by Conductor Adams to ride down on engine and get off when the train stopped to back in and protect against No. 1. He stated that he had orders that No. 1 would wait at Dorchester, a station about 4-1/2 miles north of Riceboro, until 6.05 p.m. for First No. 80, and that he started backing in at 6.00 p.m., and stopped about two cars into clear at 6.03 p.m. After he had got into clear, he stopped his train and asked his fireman, "How about that main line switch?" who answered, "It is all right." He stated that he then shut off the electric headlight and called in the flagman, and got off on the right side to make some repairs to his engine. He further stated that he later walked around in front of the engine to observe the condition of the classification signals, and came up along the left side of the engine. He stated that his fireman was on the ground on the left side and that he saw the brakeman coming up toward the engine on the left side of the train. He also stated that the light on the main track switch was not burning when he pulled by it to back in, that he did not hear No. 1 answer a signal, and that he did not see anyone give a signal.

Engineman Adkins later asked to be allowed to correct a portion of his testimony, stating that he erred in saying that he saw Brakeman Sanders coming up along the left side of the train, and should have said that as he came around to the left side of his engine, just before the collision occurred, Sanders was standing on the west side of the main track opposite the engine. There is no way of confirming the correctness of the latter statement, but his first statement was supported by the testimony of Brakeman Sanders. Engineman Adkins, however, stated that in changing his statement it was not his intention to relieve himself of any responsibility, as he knew that he had not observed the rules when he did not personally see that the passing track switch was in proper position.

Colored Fireman Simuel of First No. 80 stated that when his train pulled up to back in, the switch light on the north switch was not burning. He said that after backing into clear, Engineman Adkins asked him if they were into clear, and that he did not ask him "How about the main track switch." He said that after stopping, he got off the engine with a torch, from the left side, and went to the front end of the engine to light a classification signal. He then went back on the left side, to the gangway of the engine, and handed his torch to Engineman Adkins, who got off the engine on the left side of it. Simuel stated that he then went around the front end of the engine to adjust an ash pan lever on the right side of the engine and had started to climb up in the gangway on the right side when the collision occurred. He said that he did not see Engineman Adkins after he handed him the torch on the left side of the engine, and that there was only one torch on the engine.

Simuel's statement is completely at variance with that of Engineman Adkins, and the fact that he was found after the accident lying on the east or right side of the train would seem to support his statement that he was on the right and not on the left side of his engine, as Adkins stated, when the collision occurred.

Conductor Adams of train First No. 80 stated that he delivered a clearance card to Engineman Adkins at Riceboro while the locomotive was taking water, and that when he got off the engine he met his flagman coming up alongside his train inspecting it. He asked the flagman where the brakeman was, and the flagman replied that he was back at the caboose filling his lantern. He then instructed the flagman to ride down and protect against No. 1 while the train was backing into clear. He further stated that it was his intention to catch the caboose as it pulled by him, but that when it passed him it was going too fast for him to get on, so he called to the brakeman, who was on top of the train, that they would back in and that he would look out for the rear end. He stated

that he then walked up to the highway crossing north of the depot to protect it while the train was backing over it. He stated that the flagman was called in at 6.02 p.m., or 6.03 p.m., and the brakeman rode the train back until it stopped into clear. After the train stopped he looked ahead and saw a white light, which he took to be the switch light, but after watching it a minute or two he saw it move, and discovered that the switch light was not burning. He then asked the brakeman if he had seen any one change the switch, and the brakemen said he did not see any one change it or come from it. He stated that he then told the brakeman to run as fast as he could and see if the switch was closed. He then ran to the caboose to get a fusee to flag No. 1 with, but on reaching the caboose he consumed considerable time getting the door unlocked, and that when he finally reached the ground again No. 1 had crashed into his train. When asked if he could have reached the switch after he had the feeling that all was not right, he said the brakeman could have reached it had he hurried. He was about 35 car lengths from the switch at the time and had about five minutes before No. 1 reached it.

Flagman Dempsey of First No. 80 stated that when he was called in he started immediately to return to his train and that he was in the vicinity of the Dunlevy crossing when the collision occurred. He stated that train No. 1 was running 30 or 35 miles per hour when passing him near the Dunlevy connection switch just north of the railroad crossing, and that he did not see any one give that train a proceed signal. He said that he had told Engineman Adkins that brakeman was back in the caboose and that he expected the engineman to see that the switch was closed. He also stated that the north and south switch lights of the passing siding were not burning.

Colored Brakeman Sanders of train First No. 80 stated that he got off the engine while at the water tank and went back to the caboose to fill his lantern; that when they were pulling up to back in he stationed himself on top of the train, 8 or 9 car lengths from the engine. Conductor Adams told him to go down and back in and he did so, and rode the caboose back into the siding until the train stopped into clear. He stated that the conductor was at the telegraph office when the train got into clear and that he came out and said, "Did those fellows line up that switch?" and he told him he did not see any one change it. He stated further that conductor then told him to run as fast as he could and that he did so, and got as far as the second road crossing, midway between the depot and north switch, when he saw some one that appeared to be right in front of their engine give No. 1 a proceed signal. He then stopped running.

Engineman Rogers of train No. 1 stated before he died that he received a proceed signal from near the front of First No. 80's train, which is supported by statements of six witnesses, and as it developed that there were no white lanterns on the engine, and that Brakeman Sanders was the only person on the left side of the train in that vicinity, his location at the time a signal was answered is important.

Conductor Emery of train No. 1 stated that at the time of the collision his train was running about 20 miles per hour. He said he heard Engineman Rogers sound the station signal and also heard him sound two short blasts of the whistle in answer to a signal. He further stated that after the collision occurred his engineman told him he had received a proceed signal approaching the north passing track switch. Both Baggageman Anderson and Train Porter Frank Hill confirmed Conductor Emery's testimony regarding signal being answered.

Signal Operator Harris, at the interlocking plant at Dunlevy crossing, stated that he frequently saw switch lights on the north passing track switch and the Dunlevy connection switch not burning. He also stated that Section Foreman Ponsell did not personally attend to switch lights, but left that work to his negro laborers. Mrs. Harris, wife of the signal operator, who was at the interlocking plant just before the accident occurred, was an eye witness to the collision, and stated that she saw a signal given to train No. 1 by a lantern near the engine of the freight train, and that she heard the engineman of No. 1 answer the signal with two short blasts of the whistle. She corroborated her husband's testimony, in that Section Foreman Ponsell did not personally attend to caring for switch lights, and stated that the lights were frequently out.

Section Foreman Ponsell, in charge of the section on which this accident occurred, denied that he did not give personal attention to his work and the care of switch lights, and stated that the switch lights near Riceboro gave good service and that he very rarely found any of them not burning. He further stated that he was required to fill and light the lamps on Saturdays and inspect them on Wednesdays of each week and that he always attended to it personally. His testimony is decidedly at variance with that of Mr. and Mrs. Harris, Flagman Dempsey and Roadmaster Newton, and the evidence is clear that lights have been found not burning at Riceboro, regardless of his statement to the contrary.

Superintendent Purvis stated that on January 11, 1918, he had issued a bulletin to flagmen of passenger trains 3 and 4, which are through night trains, to report each Monday and Friday all switch lights found not burning on the South Carolina Division. It was necessary for him to again issue the

instructions February 15th through the Trainmaster, as the bulletin of January 11th had evidently been ignored, as no reports had been received at his office in the interim. Mr. Purvis stated further that it had been necessary to change flagmen frequently on these runs, and that was probably the reason his instructions had not been complied with. It is evident from the testimony that the rules regarding improperly displayed signals on this division of the Seaboard Air Line Railway have not been observed, and that switch lights found not burning are not reported by trainmen as the rules require. Superintendent Purvis admitted that such was the case as to reporting switch lights out, and when asked for a record showing switch lights not burning being reported, could only produce two reports in the six months preceding the date of this accident.

Mr. Gooding, Engineer Maintenance of Way, stated that he examined the switch lamp on the north switch at three o'clock the morning after the accident, and that he found the reservoir over half full of oil, but that the oil was very dirty and he thought it unfit to give good service.

Rule No. 104 of the Seaboard Air Line Railway reads as follows:

"Switches must be left in proper position after having been used.

"Conductors are responsible for position of the switches used by them and their trainmen, except where switch-tenders are stationed.

"Switches must not be left open for a following train unless in charge of a trainman of such train."

104a. When a train backs in on a siding to meet or be passed by another train, the engineman, when his engine is into clear, will see that the switch is properly set for the main track.

104c. When a train is standing on a passing track or side track to meet or to be passed by a train, the head brakeman in the one case, or the rear brakeman or conductor in the other, will, on the approach of said train, give it a signal to proceed if the train on passing or side track is known by him to be into clear and approaching switch set for the main track; failure to receive such signal is to be construed by approaching train as a danger signal, and such train will proceed only under control until track is known to be clear and switch properly set.

104d. When a main track switch is opened, the employe opening same will remain in charge thereof until it is closed, except when switch is opened by head brakeman to let train in on passing or side track, in which case it will be closed by rear brakeman or conductor immediately after train is into clear. Rear brakeman or conductor, in closing switch, will get on ground from that side of train opposite switch stand, in order to prevent throwing switch under train,

"Enginemen will be held equally responsible for enforcement of all rules in regard to the proper handling of switches."

Rule No. 27 reads as follows:

"A signal imperfectly displayed, or the absence of a signal at a place where a signal is usually shown, must be regarded as a stop signal, and the fact reported to the Superintendent."

In this instance these rules were not complied with.

The direct cause of this accident was the failure of the crew of train No. 80 to close the main track switch after backing into the siding at Riceboro.

The investigation developed that Conductor Adams remained at the depot while the operation of backing his train in on the siding was going on, and did not perform his duty to see that his colored brakeman either opened or closed the switch, and admitted that he did not know that the switch light was out, and made no effort to ascertain whether or not the switch was closed until it was too late to prevent the accident.

Engineman Adkins did not look to see if the switch was closed or if there was anyone nearby to close it. He simply asked his fireman if it was closed, and upon receiving an affirmative answer, shut off his electric headlight, called in his flagman, and for about nine minutes was within six or seven car lengths of the switch without making any effort to verify his fireman's statement.

While this investigation clearly established the fact that Engineman Rogers of train No. 1 received a proceed signal from someone at or near the engine of train No. 80, on account of the conflict in the statements of the employees involved it is not possible to say with certainty which employee gave this signal.

Strict observance of the rules would have required Enginemen Rogers to stop at the switch, in the absence of the switch light indication, but the fact that he received a proceed signal may have been his reason for not properly observing this rule. With the strong light produced by the electric headlight with which his engine was equipped, it would appear that the blade indication of the switch target could have been seen a sufficient distance by Engineman Rogers to have stopped his train had he noticed its indication. Engineman Rogers stated, however, before he died, that he did not notice the indication of the target, as he was looking at the switch points and that when he saw it it was too late to avoid the accident.

This investigation also clearly established the fact that the rule requiring trainmen and others to report improperly displayed signals is not observed or enforced, and in order to provide proper safety in train operation those charged with the enforcement of these rules should see to it that they are observed, and also that better attention must necessarily be given to the maintenance of switch-lights.

All of the employees of train No. 80 knew that they were on the siding to permit the passenger train to pass. They failed to take the necessary safeguards under such circumstances to protect its safety, and until rules that provide safety in train operation are strictly observed and enforced, such regrettable accidents as this will most certainly occur. Both the engineman and conductor at fault were experienced employees with clear records, and at the time of the accident had been on duty 9 hours and 2 minutes.