

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE LINE OF THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC COMPANY AT SPARKS, NEV., ON OCTOBER 6, 1925.

January 15, 1926.

To the Commission:

On October 6, 1925, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the line of the Southern Pacific Company at Sparks, Nev., resulting in the death of two employees and the injury of nine passengers. This accident was investigated in conjunction with representatives of the Public Service Commission of Nevada.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the Sparks Subdivision of the Salt Lake Division, extending between Sparks and Imlay, Nev., a distance of 137.9 miles. The point of accident was within the yard limits, on what is known as the P. F. E. icing track, at a point about 400 feet west of the east switch of the icing track; this is a facing-point switch for westbound trains and leads off the main track through a No. 10 turnout to the left or south. Approaching the switch from the east the track is tangent for about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles, while the grade is practically level. The east yard-limit board is nearly 1 mile from the east switch of the icing track, while the track circuits of the automatic block-signal system end at a point nearly 1,700 feet from this switch. The high switch-stand is located on the fireman's side of a westbound train; night indications are green when the switch is closed and red when it is open. The view of this switch stand is unobstructed. One of the duties of the yard men at this point is to handle switches for inbound and outbound trains.

Between Sparks and Vista, 2.9 miles east of Sparks, there is a track known as track 2, which parallels the main track on the north; this is not a main track, movements over it being governed by special instructions contained in the time-table. There is a crossover connecting the main track with track 2, the west switch of this crossover is located on the main track at a point 498.4 feet east of the east switch of the icing track. Under time-table rule 9, eastbound trains can not use this track unless authorized by train order; westbound trains may use it without train-order authority whenever they can not reach Sparks for a superior eastbound train or ahead of a superior westbound train.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 8.28 p. m.

Description

Eastbound freight train second No. 278 consisted of 55 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 3470, and was in charge of Conductor G. Smith and Engineman Galvin. After being iced this train proceeded eastward from the ice house platform and was brought to a stop on the icing track with the engine about 400 feet west of the east switch, to await the arrival of train No. 5, and while standing at this point its head end was struck by that train.

Westbound passenger train No. 5 consisted of one combination mail and baggage car, one baggage car, one dining car, one coach, and one sleeping car, in the order named, hauled by engine 2268, and was in charge of Conductor Coates and Engineman W. K. Smith. The first and fourth cars were of steel construction while the remainder were of wooden construction. This train passed Hafed, 6.9 miles east of Sparks, at 8.17 p. m., seven minutes late, entered the east switch of the icing track at Sparks, and collided with train second No. 278 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 20 and 25 miles an hour.

Both engines, their tenders, the first car in the passenger train, and three of the cars in the freight train, were badly damaged; engine 2268 came to rest on its right side, while the first car in train No. 5 sustained the most damage at the baggage compartment end. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman of train No. 5.

Summary of evidence.

After engine 2470 had been coupled to the cars composing train second No. 278, at the icing platform, Yardman Warnock, who was an experienced man but a new employee in the yard at Sparks, walked to the east switch of the icing track, about 1,800 feet distant, and while standing at this point he saw a westbound freight train arrive, pulling down on track 2, which track he thought was the westbound main track. Shortly afterwards he saw train second No. 278 start from the icing platform and move eastward toward the switch, and assuming that it was ready to depart he opened the switch and then entered the telephone booth, 11 feet from the switch, as it was rather chilly outside. While in the booth he heard some men talking about leaving town, apparently intending to steal a ride on one of the trains, and he came out of the telephone booth and walked eastward to the crossover switches to make sure that they had not

been tampered with; he then remained near these switches, walking back and forth to keep warm. While so engaged he saw train second No. 278 stop on the icing track, with the engine about 400 feet from the switch while the headlight was then extinguished; this caused him to wonder why the train did not head out on the main track. A short time later he saw the headlight of train No. 5 but at first thought the train was on track 2, still being of the impression that this was the westbound main track. When he definitely realized that the train was approaching on the other track he started waving violent stop signals with his white lantern; after standing at this point a short time, listening for an answer to his signals, he crossed over to the fireman's side of the track and started running toward the open switch, but the engine of train No. 5 passed him just before he reached it, headed in on the icing track, and collided with the head end of train second No. 278. Yardman Warnock stated that the switch light was burning brightly and plainly displayed a stop indication; that train No. 5 was at least 1 mile away when he started giving stop signals; that these signals were not acknowledged, and that had the engineman seen his stop signals at this time he could have brought the train to a stop before reaching the switch.

Yardman Warnock understood that all main-track switches should be left closed unless attended by some one; he knew that this particular switch was a main-track switch, and said that had he remained near the switch after opening it he could have closed it in time to have averted the accident. It further appeared from his statements, however, that since he had been transferred from Bakersfield to the yards at Sparks and Reno, which are adjacent points, he worked one day at Reno, two days at Sparks, two days at Reno, and then again at Sparks on the day of the accident; his two days' previous service at Sparks, however, had not been at the end of the yard in which this accident occurred. When he reported for duty on the afternoon of the accident, at 3 o'clock, he was told that he was to act as an engine herder, putting engines on outbound trains, taking them off inbound trains, and keeping a record of the time a particular engine left the roundhouse, the time it was coupled to its train, and the time the train departed. He said he was not told that track 2 was not a main track, that he had not been furnished with a time-table, and that in the neighborhood of 5 p.m. one of the yardmasters wrote on a slip of paper the times of inbound and outbound trains. No other instructions were given, and not having a time-table he was unaware of the time-table rule governing the use of track 2 and as the only westbound freight train seen by him, a freight extra, had arrived on that track he supposed it was the westbound main track and that it was the track on which train No. 5

would arrive. It further appeared that during his tour of duty he had not routed any westbound train into the yard with the exception of train No. 353, he said he had thrown one switch for this train, and that he did not recall on which track it had arrived.

Engineman Galvin, of train second No. 378, stated that he extinguished the headlight on his engine after coming to a stop near the east switch, at about 8.10 p.m. Although his train had been standing at this point at least 15 minutes prior to the arrival of train No. 5, and he was looking eastward out of the cab window, he did not notice that the switch was open, but did see Yardman Warnock in the vicinity of the crossover switches. Engineman Galvin saw the headlight of train No. 5 as the train came through Vista, and watched the train as it approached; he then saw Yardman Warnock giving violent stop signals with a lantern from a point in the vicinity of the crossover, and then the yardman started running on the south side of the track toward the switch, continuing to give stop signals until train No. 5 passed him. The air brakes on train No. 5 were applied in emergency just prior to the accident, fire flying from the wheels as the train entered the switch. Engineman Galvin said the headlight on train No. 5 was burning brightly, and that as nearly as he could tell in the glare of the headlight train No. 5 was about 4 or 5 car-lengths from the yardman when the violent stop signals were given, and about 15 or 16 car-lengths from his own engine, and that in his opinion had the air brakes been applied in emergency on train No. 5 when the stop signals were first given by the yardman, or had the yard-limit rule been observed, the accident would not have occurred. The statements of the fireman and head brakeman of train second No. 378 brought out nothing additional of importance.

None of the members of the train crew of train No. 5 was aware of anything wrong until the air brakes were applied in emergency just before the accident occurred, apparently about one car-length before reaching the switch. Their testimony was to the effect that the air brakes had been tested and had worked properly, no trouble being experienced in making stops en route; that the station whistle signal had been sounded at a point about one mile from Sparks; that the speed was about 30 or 35 miles an hour at the time of the accident, and that after the accident the switch light was burning brightly, plainly displaying a red indication.

General Yardmaster Davis stated that he did not know whether or not Yardman Warnock was given any instructions with respect to the track arrangement at Sparks, or whether or not he was furnished with a current time-table. Assistant Yardmaster Devere stated that it was his duty to have instructed Yardman Warnock in his duties, but that he did not give the yardman instructions with respect to operation at the east end of Sparks yard, as Yardmaster Billingsley said he had issued the necessary instructions.

Yardmaster Billingsley stated that Yardman Warnock worked under his jurisdiction and at about 4.30 p.m. on the day of the accident he instructed the yardman as to the different tracks. He said Yardman Warnock asked him about track 2 and he told him that passenger trains were not run on it and that it was not used as double track. He did not know, however, whether or not Yardman Warnock had been furnished with a time-table.

At a point about 500 feet west of the icing-track switch there is a derail switch south of the main track which normally displays a stop indication; considerable testimony was introduced to show that the light on this switch could easily have been confused with the light at the icing-track switch. This derail switch, however, is 18 feet south of the center line of the main track, in addition to being 500 feet west of the icing-track switch, and subsequent tests showed that the position of this derailing switch had no bearing on the accident, since the indications of the two switches could easily be distinguished from each other.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by an open switch.

There was a discrepancy in the statements of Yardmaster Billingsley and Yardman Warnock as to whether the yardman had been told that track 2 was not used as double track. It did appear, however, that this was the first time the yardman had worked at this end of the yard and that he did not have a time-table within which was the rule governing the use of track 2. Having seen a westbound freight train entering the yard on track 2 a short time previously he said he supposed that there were two main tracks and that the switch he had left open was on the eastbound track. Having opened this switch, however, it was the duty of Yardman Warnock to stay in its immediate vicinity and had he done so he would have been able to close it in time to have averted the accident.

The evidence was clear that the switch had been open for some time prior to the arrival of train No. 5, that the switch lamp was displaying a red or stop indication, that the view of this indication was unobstructed, and that Yardman Warnock gave violent stop signals before train No. 5 reached the crossover switch 500 feet from the open switch, although there is a dispute as to the exact location of train No. 5 at the time these stop signals were given by Yardman Warnock. It appeared, however, that the engine crew of train No. 5 did not see the yardman's stop signals and apparently did not notice that the switch was open until the train had nearly reached it. Attention is also called to the fact that under rule 93 all trains are required to run within yard limits prepared to stop unless the main track is seen or known to be clear. Under these circumstances, the engine crew, of train No. 5 are at fault for their failure to maintain a proper lookout and to observe and be governed by the stop signals of the yardman and also the stop indication of the switch lamp, while the engineman is also at fault for his failure to comply with the yard-limit rule.

There is a possibility that the local officials of the Southern Pacific Company are at fault for their failure to see that Yardman Warnock was properly instructed. It was stated that he had been told that track 3 was not used as double track but there is room for doubt on this point. It also appeared that one of the assistant yardmasters did not have a correct understanding of the rule, inasmuch as he testified that both westbound and eastbound trains used this track when authorized by train order. The rule, the substance of which has been given previously, places no such restrictions on the movements of westbound trains.

Had the automatic block signal system extended through the yard limits it is possible the signal indications would have been observed by the engine crew of train No. 5, in which event the accident might not have occurred; an adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented it.

At the time of the accident none of the employees involved had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.