

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
SOUTHERN RAILWAY NEAR HICKS, TENN., ON OCTOBER 4,
1926.

November 8, 1926.

To the Commission

On October 4, 1926, there was head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Southern Railway near Hicks, Tenn., which resulted in the death of one employee and the injury of three employees.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the La Follette Branch of the Coster Division, extending between La Follette and Vasper, Tenn., a distance of 10.1 miles, this 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 at a point about 3,071 feet west of the station at Hicks; approaching this point from the east there is a 4° curve to the left 1,142 feet in length, followed by 740 feet of tangent track and then a 3° curve to the left 1,900 feet in length, the accident occurring on the last-mentioned curve at a point 1,190 feet from its eastern end. Approaching from the west there is a 4° curve to the right 828 feet in length, 176 feet of tangent, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. On account of a high embankment on the south or inside of the curve on which the accident occurred the view of enginemen approaching the point of accident from the east is restricted to approximately 642 feet and from the west to approximately 584 feet. The grade is 0.38 per cent ascending for east-bound trains at the point of accident.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 9.36 a.m.

Description

Eastbound freight train extra 281 consisted of three cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 281, and

was in charge of Conductor Lampler and Engineman Duncan. At La Follette, 8.4 miles west of Hicks, the crew received a copy of train order No. 515, Form 19, providing for a meet with train No. 101 at Vasper. Extra 281 departed from LaFollette at 8.55 a.m., stopped for water at a tank located about 1 mile west of Hicks, then proceeded and had reached a point about one-half mile beyond the water tank when it collided with train No. 101 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 15 and 25 miles an hour.

Eastbound passenger train No. 101 consisted of two coaches hauled by engine 3456, running backwards, and was in charge of Conductor Reams and Engineman Hardin. At Vasper, 1.7 miles west of Hicks, the crew received a clearance card, Form 603, stating there were no orders for their train. This train departed from that point according to the train sheet at 9.25 a.m., on time, and after making a station stop at Hicks it proceeded westward and collided with extra 281 while traveling at an estimated speed of from 10 to 15 miles an hour.

Engine 281 was turned over on its right side against the embankment, the tender was badly damaged and the first car demolished, while the second car was only slightly damaged. The tender of engine 3456 was destroyed, while the engine and coaches were driven back about 75 feet by the force of the impact but were not derailed, the engine was slightly damaged. The employee killed was the engineman of extra 281.

Summary of evidence

Operator Tiller said the operator at La Follette informed him that extra 281 was ready to depart from that point for Vasper and he then connected the branch wire through to the dispatcher, who issued train order No. 515 directing train No. 101 to meet extra 281 at Vasper, the order being copied by Operator Tiller on Form 31 addressed to train No. 101. He did not immediately fill out a clearance card to accompany the order and did not remove it from the pad on which it was written, as after he received the order there were three other passenger trains which arrived at his station and he had other duties to perform in connection with handling baggage and express, as it turned out, however, there were 10 pieces of express but no baggage. When Conductor Reams, of train No. 101, asked him for a clearance card he issued it, noting thereon that there were

no orders for that train, entirely overlooking the order previously copied which was lying on his desk covered with papers. Operator Tiller did not communicate with the dispatcher before issuing the clearance card as he said it was not customary to do so when there are no orders for a train. Shortly after train No. 101 departed from Vasper the dispatcher called him and inquired if extra 281 had arrived, he then remembered that he had failed to deliver train order No. 515 and made an attempt to have some one stop extra 281 at an intermediate station but was informed that the train had already passed. Operator Tiller admitted that he had entirely forgotten train order No. 515 at the time he issued the clearance card for train No. 101 and accepted full responsibility for the accident. He said what might have contributed to his oversight was the fact that he was thinking about a recent automobile accident in which he was involved, in addition to the station work he had to perform between the time he copied the order and the time he delivered the clearance card.

Engineman Hardin, of train No. 101, stated that he received a clearance card, but no train orders, at Vasper. The clearance card was filled out properly with a notation that there were no orders for his train. The train departed on time, stopped at Hicks, and shortly afterwards, when it had increased speed to about 18 miles an hour, he noticed extra 281 approaching, apparently about 75 yards distant, he at once closed the throttle, reversed the engine, applied the brakes in emergency and jumped from the engine.

Conductor Reams, of train No. 101, stated that before departing from Vasper he reported at the register window at which time the operator issued a clearance card on which was a notation that there were no orders for train No. 101, he did not notice anything unusual in the actions of Operator Tiller. His train departed from Vasper, stopped at Hicks, departing from that point at 9.04 a. m., and had attained a speed of about 20 miles an hour when he felt an emergency application of the brakes just before the collision occurred. He said the speed of his train was reduced to 12 or 15 miles an hour at the time of collision.

Fireman Webber, of extra 281, stated that after taking water at Hicks tank at 9.25 a.m., his train proceeded and was traveling at a speed of 15 to 20 miles an hour approaching the point of accident. He said his range of vision on the outside of the curve

was limited to about two car-lengths and that as soon as he saw the approaching train he jumped from his engine. He did not know whether or not his engineman was looking ahead or applied the brakes before the collision occurred.

Conductor Wampler, of extra 281, stated that after his train departed from Hicks water tank at 9.33 a.m., a station whistle signal was sounded at which time he instructed his flagman to give the engineman a proceed signal, the collision occurring shortly afterwards. He was not certain but thought that the engineman was looking back for acknowledgement of his whistle signal and did not notice train No. 101 as soon as it could have been seen from the engineman's position on the inside of the curve. Conductor Wampler did not know whether or not the brakes were applied or the throttle was closed, as there was no appreciable decrease in speed before the impact. He estimated the speed of his train at about 20 miles an hour at the time of the collision.

The statements of other members of the crews involved brought out no additional facts of importance.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Operator Tiller, stationed at Vasper, to deliver a copy of a meet order.

The rules of this railroad require operators receiving train orders to fill out clearance cards immediately, on Form 603, showing the numbers of the orders received. Operator Tiller did not fill out the required clearance card immediately after copying the order fixing the meeting point of train No. 101, and thereby deprived himself of a check against error which probably would have attracted his attention to the undelivered order. The testimony of Operator Tiller also showed that there were various papers on his desk, the order being hidden beneath one of them at the time the clearance card was delivered. The operator at Vasper performs the duties of passenger, freight, express, and baggage agent, but the work is not arduous and there was no reasonable excuse for the failure of Operator Tiller to deliver the train order to the conductor of train No. 101.

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, 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. Borland,

Director