

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
SOUTHERN RAILWAY AT PEAK, TENN , ON JUNE 14, 1927.

July 21, 1927.

To the Commission:

On June 14, 1927, there was a side collision between two freight trains on the Southern Railway at Peak, Tenn., resulting in the death of three employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Coster Division, Middle District, extending between Knoxville, and Jellico, Tenn , a distance of 65.3 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident 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 in a cut, at the fouling point of the west switch of the passing track at Peak, this passing track is 2,962.9 feet in length and parallels the main track on the south. Approaching the point of accident from the east, beginning at the east switch of the passing track, there are 515.1 feet of tangent, a 5° curve to the right 1,007.6 feet in length and then 853.4 feet of tangent, followed by a 2° curve to the left 459.3 feet in length, after which the track is tangent to the west switch, a distance of 127.5 feet and for a short distance beyond that point. The grade is 1.46 per cent descending for westbound trains for a very short distance.

The weather was cloudy and somewhat showery, at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 10.10 a.m.

Description

Westbound third-class freight train No. 67 consisted of 23 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 669, and was in charge of Conductor Chesney and Engineman Portwood. This train left Heiskell, the last open office and 4.1 miles east of Peak, at 9.25 a.m., according to the train sheet, 1 hour and 21 minutes late. Three cars were picked up from a spur track at Peak and the train then entered the passing track for the purpose of meeting a train No. 20, and also to unload freight, when this work

had been completed the conductor gave a proceed signal and the train started to head out on the main track at the west switch at a speed of about 3 or 4 miles per hour. The engine and seven or eight cars were on the main track when the side of the train was struck by train No. 81, which was traveling in the same direction on the main track.

Westbound third-class freight train No. 81 consisted of 42 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 572, and was in charge of Conductor Phillips and Engineman Mell. This train left Heiskell at 9 54 a m , according to the train sheet, 1 hour and 30 minutes late, met train No. 20, which was in the clear on the siding at Chestnut Ridge, 1.9 miles east of Peak, and collided with train No. 67 at the fouling point of the west switch of the passing track at Peak while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 10 and 18 miles per hour.

Engine 572 was derailed to the north, traveled about 166 feet and came to rest opposite the switch, leaning to the right against the side of the cut, in a badly damaged condition, 23 cars were also derailed, many of them being badly damaged. The employees killed were the engineman, fireman, and a brakeman, all of train No. 81.

Summary of evidence.

Conductor Chesney, of train No. 67, stated that after nearly all the freight had been unloaded he instructed Head Brakeman Davis to go to the west passing track switch and to open it when the proceed signal was given. Conductor Chesney gave the proceed signal and the train headed out of the west passing-track switch on to the main line at a speed of about 3 or 4 miles per hour. Conductor Chesney boarded the front end of the caboose and at this time Flagman Thacker told him that he thought he heard train No. 81 approaching. Conductor Chesney then went through the caboose to open the angle cock but the flagman had already opened it and had started back to flag, with a fusee, which he did not have time to light. Conductor Chesney also started back and reached a point about five or six car-lengths from the caboose, at a highway grade crossing located 1,322 feet east of the west switch; he gave violent stop signals and shouted as the engine passed but his signals were not answered. He said that train No. 81 was about 20 car-lengths east of the crossing when he first saw it, traveling at a speed of about 30 or 35 miles per hour. When the engine and about 10 cars had passed him, still moving at a speed of 30 or 35 miles per hour, he noticed that the brakes were applied and it ran

an additional distance of about 20 car-lengths before coming to a full stop. There is a telephone booth located north of the tracks and about four car lengths east of the crossing, but Conductor Chesney said that he was busy with his work and therefore did not use the telephone to obtain a line-up on approaching trains. He admitted that it occurred to him that train No. 81 might be following closely and that he gave Engineman Portwood a signal to proceed from the passing track to the main track without providing any protection for the movement, although the subject of protecting movements out of passing tracks had been taken up at a rule-book examination class attended by him on the night before the accident. Conductor Chesney thought, however, that the accident was due to the failure of the crew of train No. 81 to obey his stop signals. It further appeared from the statements of Conductor Chesney that he had heard the operator at Heiskell say that train No. 81 would meet train No. 20 at that point. As a matter of fact, however, the dispatcher found that he could advance train No. 81 without delay to train No. 20 and so changed the meeting point to Chestnut Ridge, 1.9 miles from Peak, instead of Heiskell, 4.1 miles from Peak. Nothing was brought out, however, to indicate that the fact Conductor Chesney thought these trains would meet at Heiskell had caused him to assume that he could move his train out on the main track without protection against train No. 81.

Flagman Thacker, of train No. 67, stated that when his train started to head out of the passing track he heard train No. 81 approaching and informed the conductor to this effect. He then went through the caboose, secured a fusee, opened the angle cock, and started back on the main track toward the approaching train, waving violent stop signals with the unlighted fusee. Flagman Thacker said that when he first saw train No. 81 he was about 1 car-length west of the crossing and the train was coming in sight around the curve, it then being about 20 car-lengths distant. He continued giving stop signals, which were not answered, until the engine was within two or three car-lengths of him and then he got off the track on the fireman's side, shouting to the crew as the engine passed him. He saw two men on the fireman's side, looking toward the fire box, and was of the opinion that they did not see him. Flagman Thacker said that while proper rear-end protection had not been afforded to his train as it headed out of the passing track, yet he thought that had the engineman of train No. 81 been maintaining a proper lookout ahead his stop signals could have been seen in ample time to have averted the accident.

Engineman Portwood, of train No. 67, said he was unaware of anything wrong until Head Brakeman Davis boarded the engine as it headed out of the passing track and said

that he heard train No. 81 coming, the accident occurring immediately afterwards. Engineman Portwood said he had assumed his train was being afforded proper rear-end protection. The statements of Fireman Peeler and Head Brakeman Davis corroborated in substance those of Engineman Portwood.

None of the surviving members of the crew of train No. 81 was aware of anything wrong until just prior to the accident. Conductor Phillips, who was riding in the cupola of the caboose, on the right side, said that the speed of the train was about 25 miles per hour when the air brakes were applied in emergency, reducing the speed to 10 or 12 miles per hour. Then he changed this statement by saying that the train approached Peak at a speed of 25 miles per hour, that an application of the brakes reduced this speed to the extent of 6 or 8 miles per hour, and that on reaching a point about 10 or 15 car-lengths from where this application had been made, when the caboose was near the east passing-track switch, the brakes were applied in emergency, no release from the previous application having been made. The collision occurred after the train traveled about three or four car-lengths' additional distance, at which time the speed was about 10 or 12 miles per hour. The statements of Flagman Aravine, of train No. 81, and of Conductor Seaton, who was riding on the rear platform of the caboose while his helper engine followed the train, practically coincided with those of Conductor Phillips. Conductor Seaton also said that the air brakes were applied in emergency when the caboose was about 5 car-lengths east of the east switch and that the caboose came to a stop about 33 car-lengths west of the switch. There was only one application of the air brakes and it reduced the speed from 30 miles per hour to about 18 miles per hour.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by failure to provide proper flag protection for train No. 67 while it was heading out on the main track, for which Conductor Chesney is primarily responsible.

The indications were that the members of the crew of train No. 67 were in a hurry to leave Peak as soon as possible, and the result was that Conductor Chesney gave a signal authorizing his train to pull out on the main track without any attempt having been made to provide proper flag protection for the movement. It also appeared that he made no effort to ascertain whether or not there was another train closely approaching, although there was a telephone booth nearby which could have been utilized for this purpose. Conductor Chesney said he had been

informed that train No. 81 was to meet train No. 20 at Haiskill, apparently he did not know that an order had been issued advancing train No. 81 to Chestnut Ridge and it is possible he may have been of the impression that the movement of train No. 20 would protect his own train against train No. 81 long enough to enable his train to head out on the main track and proceed westward, although nothing was developed to prove anything definite along this line. There is little that can be said by way of excuse for the actions of Conductor Chesney, particularly in view of the fact that the subject of providing flag protection while pulling out of passing tracks had been taken up at an examination class on the rules which he had attended only the night before the accident.

Flagman Thacker, who had been in train service since 1906, undoubtedly was not in need of instructions as to what was required of him under the circumstances. At Peak, however, he had been employed in assisting in the unloading of the freight and apparently the conductor gave the proceed signal as soon as this work was completed, without first giving the flagman an opportunity of providing adequate flag protection.

Under the rules, second and inferior class trains and extras are required to approach stations with caution. The view approaching Peak is only fairly good, while, the cloudy and rainy weather conditions, making the rails somewhat slippery, did not improve matters. It appeared, however, that the distance between the point where the flagman could have been seen by Engineman Mell and the point where the accident occurred was about 2,000 feet, and it is believed that had Engineman Mell been paying a little more attention to the requirements of the rule above mentioned it is probable that he would have been able to bring his train to a stop before it reached the point at which the accident occurred.

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, at the time of the accident the crew of train No. 67 had been on duty 3 hours and 10 minutes and the crew of train No. 81 a period of 2 hours and 10 minutes, prior to which both crews had been off duty more than 16 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.