

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED
ON THE SOUTHERN RAILWAY NEAR PIEDMONT,
GA., ON JULY 8, 1920.

August 7, 1920.

On July 8, 1920, there was a head-end collision on the Southern Railway near Piedmont, Ga., which resulted in the death of 3 employees and the injury of 18 passengers and 5 employees. After investigation of this accident the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

This accident occurred on the Fort Valley Branch of the Columbus Division, a single-track line extending from Williamson, Ga., to Fort Valley, Ga., a distance of 60.9 miles, over which trains are operated by time-table and train-orders, no block-signal system being in use. Approaching the point of accident from the north there is a 5-degree curve to the left 1,544 feet in length, followed by a tangent 326 feet long and a 5-degree curve to the right 1730 feet in length. The accident occurred on this curve about 800 feet from its northern end. Approaching the curve from the south the track is tangent for nearly a mile. The grade varies from .4 per cent to 1.0 per cent ascending for southbound trains. The accident occurred in a cut, the sides of which are 15 feet high, restricting the view from approaching trains to about 300 feet. At the time of the accident the weather was dark and cloudy.

Southbound passenger train No. 43, en route to Fort Valley from Atlanta, Ga., consisted of engine 3859, 1 combination mail and baggage car, 1 baggage car, and 2 coaches, in the order named, and was in charge of Conductor Woodall and Engineman Kinney. All of the cars in this train were of wooden construction, except the rear coach which was of steel construction. This train left Williamson, the last open telegraph station north of the point of accident and 14.79 miles distant therefrom, at 6.45 p.m., on time, made several station stops along the route, and at about 7.30 p.m. collided with extra 100 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 30 miles an hour.

Northbound freight train extra 100, consisted of 10 loaded freight cars and a coach, hauled by engine 100, and was in charge of Conductor Check and Engineman Hesterly. This train left Fort Valley at 1.30 p.m. Considerable trouble was experienced with the injectors on engine 100, and on arrival of the train at Yatesville water tank, about 2 miles north of Yatesville and 7 miles south of Piedmont, a delay of from 30 to 45 minutes was experienced on account of working on the injectors. Just before leaving this point

the engineman advised the conductor, according to the latter's statement, that he would stop at Piedmont and wait for train No. 43. Extra 100, however, passed Piedmont without stopping, and at about 7.30 p.m. collided with train No. 43 at a point 1.32 miles north of Piedmont while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 18 miles an hour.

Both engines came to rest on their sides on the west side of the track against the bank of the cut and were badly damaged, the cabs of both engines being demolished. The first car in each train was telescoped by the tender, and the third and fourth cars in extra 100 were slightly damaged. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman of extra 100 and the engineman of train No. 43.

Conductor Woodall, of train No. 43 stated that his first indication of danger was when he felt the air brakes on his train applied in emergency just before the collision occurred. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the collision at about 28 or 30 miles an hour.

Brakeman Bell of extra 100, who was riding on the engine approaching the point of accident, stated that on account of the engineman and fireman working on the injectors, he was cutting coal for the fireman. He had just started up on the tank when he saw the headlight of train No. 43 approaching about two or three car-lengths distant, and jumped.

Flagman Hudgens, of extra 100, was also riding on the engine, and had been standing near the engineman from the time his train left the water tank near Yatesville until just before the accident occurred. For about four miles approaching the point of accident there was no water in sight in the water glass; the engineman was worried considerably about it, and it was his opinion the engineman was so absorbed in trying to get the injectors on his engine to work properly that he forgot all about meeting train No. 43. Flagman Hudgens said he did not know that the engineman and conductor planned to meet train No. 43 at Piedmont.

Conductor Check of extra 100, stated that previous to this trip he had never operated over the Fort Valley Branch of the Columbus Division. On reporting for duty at the South Yard, Atlanta, when he ascertained that he was to run to Fort Valley, he sent a message to the chief dispatcher at Williamson, the initial station on the Fort Valley Branch, protesting against being sent on that branch on the ground that he was not familiar with it. On arrival at Williamson, however, he was informed that he would have to make the trip as there was no other conductor available. Being assured by the engineman that he was thoroughly acquainted with the branch, he decided to go. The trip from Williamson to Fort Valley was made after dark, and he was unable to familiarize himself with any

of the physical characteristics of this branch. On the return trip, when the train was stopped at the water tank near Yatesville, Engineman Hesterly informed him that they would go to Piedmont for train No. 43. Conductor Cheek said he did not know when his train passed Topoka Junction or Piedmont, but approaching the point of accident, he became uneasy regarding the whereabouts of his train, and knowing that train No. 43 was due at Piedmont at 7.30, he started toward the head end of his train at about 7.22 p.m. in order to ascertain from the engineman how far his train was from Piedmont and to arrange to flag No. 43 if necessary. He had reached the third car from the engine when the collision occurred.

This accident was caused by extra 100 occupying the main track on the time of a superior train, for which the conductor and engineman are responsible.

According to his own statement, Conductor Cheek was riding inside the coach, paying no attention to the operation of his train and without attempting to locate stations or mileposts, until within a very few minutes before the accident occurred. The conductor admitted that he remembered when his train passed Topoka Junction, at which point the tracks of this road cross the line of the Central of Georgia Railroad, and notwithstanding his unfamiliarity with the road, had Conductor Cheek been paying proper attention to the operation of his train he would have discovered by referring to his time-table when his train passed Topoka Junction, that Piedmont was the next station north of the junction, 4.1 miles distant, thus placing himself in position to observe when his train was approaching the meeting point, and to prevent the engineman from proceeding past that point.

While the engine crew of this train had considerable trouble with the injectors from the time the train left Fort Valley until the collision occurred, Engineman Hesterly should not have allowed himself to become so engrossed in working with the injectors on his engine as to forget about the time-table rights of an opposing superior train, as it was apparent he did in this case. Flagman Hudgens, who was riding on the engine had a time-table and a watch; he should have known that his train was encroaching on the time of train No. 43 and called the engineman's attention to that fact.

The investigation disclosed that the crew of this train, with the exception of the engineman, were entirely unfamiliar with this branch of the Columbus Division, and the engineman had been promoted only a few months. According to information received by General Superintendent Pelter from the call bureau at Atlanta, when Conductor Cheek protested against being sent over this line on the ground of unfamiliarity with the road, there were other conductors available

at Atlanta who were familiar with this part of the Columbus Division.

Conductor Cheek entered the service as flagman in 1903 and was promoted to conductor in 1906. His record was good. Engineman Hesterly entered the service as fireman in 1900, and was promoted to hostler in 1902. In 1904 he was discharged for being asleep while on duty. In 1911 he was re-employed as hostler-fireman and in April, 1920, was promoted to engineman. At the time of the accident the members of the crew of extra 100 had been on duty 6 hours and 30 minutes after having been off duty for 8 hours. The members of the crew of train No. 43 had been on duty for 3 hours and 5 minutes.