

July 16/20
IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED
ON THE SOUTHERN RAILWAY NEAR TALLAPOOSA, GA.,
ON MAY 9, 1920.

1920
July 14, 1920.

On May 9, 1920, there was a head-end collision between a work train and a passenger train on the Southern Railway near Tallapoosa, Ga., which resulted in the death of 1 employee, and the injury of 12 passengers and 19 employees. After investigation of this accident the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

This accident occurred on that part of the Birmingham Division which extends between Birmingham, Ala., and Austell, near Atlanta, Ga. With the exception of two short double-track sections this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. The accident occurred in single-track territory. Approaching the point of accident from the west there is a curve to the right 3,172 feet in length; for about 1,450 feet this curve is about 2°, then increasing to about 7° for the remainder of the distance. The accident occurred on the curve at a point about 1,124 feet from its eastern end, in about the center of a 630-foot cut, the sides of which have a maximum height of about 15 feet. The point of accident is practically at the summit of two grades, that approaching from the west being 1.4 per cent while approaching from the east it varies between .9 per cent and 1.8 per cent. The weather at the time of the accident was clear.

Work extra 4610, in charge of Conductor G. J. Cheek and Engineman Cunningham, was working between Tallapoosa and Waco, 7.6 miles apart, together with work extra 4545, clearing up debris from a derailment which occurred on May 7. While engaged in this work protection against eastbound trains was afforded by Flagman J. S. Cheek, stationed at Tallapoosa, whose instructions were contained in work train order No. 1, on form 896, reading as follows:

"Written 5.40 a. m.
To Flagman Cheek

5/9 1920
of work extra 4610

Hold all trains
Tallapoosa
4610

at
until work extra
arrives.

All trains call work extra 4610 in at Tallapoosa.

Cheek, Conductor."

On completing its work at 12.50 p. m., work extra 4610, consisting of 2 box cars, engine 4610 headed west, 1 box car, 1 tank car, and a derriok car, in the order named, started for Tallapoosa, followed by work extra 4545, for the purpose of getting into clear for train No. 30. Work extra 4610 had proceeded a distance of about three-fourths of a mile when it collided with train No. 30 while moving at a speed estimated to have been between 6 and 8 miles an hour.

Eastbound passenger train No. 30, en route from Birmingham to Washington, D. C., consisted of 1 combination car, 2 coaches, 2 sleeping cars, 1 dining car and 1 observation car, hauled by engine 1345 and was in charge of Conductor Baxter and Engineman Spinks. It left Birmingham at 9.00 a. m., and on arrival at Tallapoosa at 12.36 p. m. the train order board was

found in the stop position. After stopping at the station Engineman Spinks signed the work train order held by Flagman Cheek; he noted that it required the flagman to hold all trains but did not read that part providing for trains to call in the work extra. He then went into the telegraph office, and in a minute or two returned to his engine after telling the conductor to bring to him any orders which might be received. Conductor Baxter received an order to meet train No. 29 at Temple, 18.8 miles beyond Tallapoosa, and after a total delay of about 10 minutes received a clearance card, form 603, which read as follows:

"Block is permissive on wk ex 4610 and 4545."

This clearance card was issued at 12.46 p. m. and signed by Operator Crawford. Conductor Baxter then went to the engine and delivered a copy of the train order and the clearance card to Engineman Spinks, remarking that they had a permissive card on the work extras; the engineman did not say anything to the conductor about having signed the work train order held by Flagman Cheek, thinking that the conductor had seen it, and when the passenger-train flagman had been called in, train No. 30 departed, at 12.49 p. m.. At this time Flagman Cheek was sitting on a truck at the station; he had said nothing to any member of the crew with the exception of the engineman, but he supposed the train would stop at the east passing-track switch, 1 1/2 miles from the station, as in addition to having had the engineman sign the work train order he stated he told him that the work extras would clear the main track at the east passing-track switch. Train No. 30 passed this switch without stopping, and at 12.55

p. m. collided with work extra 4610 at a point about 3-1/2 miles east of Tallapoosa while moving at a speed estimated to have been about 10 miles an hour.

The first box car of work extra 4610 was demolished, but none of the other equipment of either train was derailed or badly damaged. The employee killed was a laborer on the work extra.

At the time train No. 30 arrived at Tallapoosa the block between that station and Waco was occupied by the two work extras and also by eastbound freight train extra 4559. Operator Crawford held train No. 30 until extra 4559 was reported clear of the block at Waco at about 12.45 p. m. He then inquired of the operator at Waco if the two work extras were there and received a negative reply. He therefore supposed that the work extras had cleared extra 4559 at the east passing-track switch at Tallapoosa, which was correct, and erroneously assumed that they would not again occupy the main track until after the departure of train No. 30. Operator Crawford claimed that he then told the conductor and engineman, both of whom he said were in the office, that the two work extras had been clearing at the east passing-track switch at Tallapoosa but that he was unable to obtain a report concerning them on account of the telephone line between his office and the east passing-track switch being out of order, and he said that he then issued the clearance card for the purpose of enabling train No. 30 to proceed as far as the switch, cautioning the crew to look out for the work extras at

that point. He acknowledged his mistake in not making the clearance card read "permissive on arrival of work extras 4510 and 4545."

The statements of Engineman Spinks and Conductor Baxter indicated that the engineman returned to his engine as soon as he had found out the reason for the delay; Conductor Baxter said he understood there was a telegraph instrument at the scene of the derailment and when he received the clearance card his impression was that the work extras were moving eastward with the intention of clearing the block at Waco, and that for the purpose of saving time a permissive movement of train No. 30 into the occupied block was authorized. On his way from the telegraph office, however, Conductor Baxter looked at the clearance card a second time, stopped in the doorway, looked at the operator, and according to his own statement remarked "It will be all right if these work extras are going east but it will be hell if they are coming west." The operator replied that they probably were into clear "up yonder" and from this the conductor thought the work extras had gotten into clear at Waco; he denied that there was any doubt in his mind as to where the work extras were going. He considered the clearance card sufficient authority for his train to enter the block as long as it was not occupied by a first-class train, and provided his train proceeded under control.

Engineman Spinks said that while he was in the office the operator said he did not know which way the work extras were moving and also said something about the operator at Waco thinking

he heard the work extras approaching that point. In view of these remarks, when the conductor delivered the clearance card to him he assumed that the work extras were proceeding to Waco, that the clearance card superseded the flagman's hold order, and that all he was required to do was to proceed with caution. Engineman Spinks said that he did not say anything about having signed the work train order either to the conductor or to the fireman, although required by rule to inform the fireman, and that this was the first order of this kind he had ever signed. The fireman had seen Flagman Cheek speaking with the engineman, but on account of being busy taking water and cleaning the ash pan did not pay any attention to the conversation.

Operator Crawford had not been in communication with the point where the work extras were at work, there being no emergency connection established as Conductor Baxter assumed, neither was the operator in communication with the dispatcher, who knew nothing of the clearance card issued to the crew of train No. 30.

The rules governing the use of the manual block-signal system are contained in the time-table. The last paragraph of rule 116 reads as follows:

"A train must not be admitted to a block unless it is clear except as provided in the rule 129 or 134, or by special order."

Rule 134 applies in case the operator is unable to communicate with the next block office on account of a failure of communication, or for other cause. Rule 129 reads as follows:

"When a work extra is occupying a block, before permitting any train to enter the block occupied, all trains must be stopped and given

a clearance card, form 603, showing the work extra in the block."

The provisions of rule 116 for an absolute block are also modified by instructions issued by the superintendent under date of September 25, 1917, and reissued on December 16, 1918, authorizing permissive movements in the case of following freight trains, but it is definitely stated in these instructions that they do not refer to troop, circus, passenger or other special trains. While these instructions are apparently intended to prevent the possibility of extra trains being authorized to make permissive movements in case they are carrying passengers, rule 129 does not make any exceptions; its only definite requirement is that any train entering a block occupied by a work extra must have a clearance card showing the presence of the work extra.

The chief dispatcher stated that there was nothing in the rules to prevent a permissive card being issued to a first-class train, but that special instructions had been issued not to do so. Superintendent Vance declined to state how rule 129 was intended to operate except to say that it did not apply to first-class trains. The superintendent also stated that there was no rule or special instruction containing this exception, but that it was generally understood by all concerned.

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Spinks of train No. 30 to obey the written flagging instructions held by Flagman Cheek, of work extra 4610.

According to his own statement, Engineman Spinks' error was due to the fact that he knew the flagman, conductor and operator

were at the station and thinking that they had made the necessary arrangements for his train to proceed he supposed that the clearance card issued after he had signed the flagging instructions superseded those instructions.

Engineman Spinks was employed as an engineman in 1883 and had a good record. At the time of the accident he had been on duty 4 hours and 25 minutes, after having been off duty for several months.

While the evidence indicates that in practice under the manual block system on this railroad an absolute block is provided for passenger trains in all except emergency cases, attention is called to the fact that under rule 129 no restriction is placed on authorizing such trains to enter an occupied block when the train in the block is a work extra. According to the superintendent, rule 129 has never been modified or amended, and under these circumstances Conductor Baxter had a right to accept the clearance card issued to him by Operator Crawford. Although the superintendent supposed it was generally understood the rule did not apply to first-class trains, the occurrence of this accident and the statements of the employees in charge of the train indicated that they, at least, did not have such an understanding. It is evident from the investigation that the issuance of a permissive card of this character to a first-class train was not in accordance with common practice, and Operator Crawford exercised bad judgment in authorizing the passenger train to enter an occupied block without instructions from the dispatcher.

Attention has been frequently called to the dangers

arising from rules which are ambiguous, inadequate or not fully understood, and if it is the intention of officials of this railway that rule 129 shall not apply to first-class trains, definite instructions to that effect should be issued immediately instead of allowing the matter to be left to a general understanding.