

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
ST. LOUIS-SAN FRANCISCO RAILWAY AT FICKINGER, ARK.,
ON NOVEMBER 11, 1929.

February 20, 1930.

To the Commission:

On November 11, 1929, there was a collision between a passenger train and a cut of standing freight cars on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway at Fickinger, Ark., resulting in the injury of nine passengers, two mail clerks, one person carried under contract, and five employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Memphis Subdivision of the Southern Division, extending between Thayer, Mo., and Memphis, Tenn., a distance of 144.6 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable, train orders, and an automatic block-signal system. The accident occurred on the passing track at Fickinger, at a point 1,752 feet south of the north switch; the passing track is 3,002 feet in length and parallels the main track on the east. Approaching from the north the passing track is tangent to within 416.5 feet of the point of accident, and then there is a 30° curve to the left to where the collision occurred, this curve extending for a distance of 200.2 feet beyond that point. The grade for southbound trains is slightly ascending to within about 150 feet of the point of collision; it is then level to and beyond where the collision occurred.

A track known as the "back track" parallels the passing track on the east; this track is 815 feet in length and its north switch is located 400 feet north of the point of collision. At the time of the accident, a cut of 10 loaded hopper cars was standing on the passing track, the north end of this cut being at the point of collision.

On account of the bank of a cut on the inside of the curve and the ascending grade, the fireman's view from the cab of a southbound engine was restricted.

The weather was cloudy at the time of the accident which occurred at about 2.03 p.m.

Description

Southbound passenger train No. 103 consisted of one mail car, one baggage car, one combination coach and baggage car, and one coach, in the order named, hauled by engine 1061, and was in charge of Conductor Emery and Engineman Jacobs. All of the cars were of steel construction, with the exception of the last car, which was of steel-underframe construction. At Thayer, 10.5 miles north of Fickinger, a copy of train order No. 54, Form 19, was received, reading as follows:

"No. 103 Eng 1061 meet
No 104 Eng 1062 at
Fickinger."

Fickinger is also the scheduled meeting point for these two trains. Train No. 103 left Thayer at 1.36 p.m., according to the train sheet, six minutes late, and left Mammoth Springs, 2.5 miles beyond, at 1.45 p.m., according to the train sheet, 10 minutes late. On arrival at Fickinger it headed in at the north switch of the passing track, and while moving through that track at a speed estimated to have been between 8 and 15 miles per hour, it collided with the cut of cars.

The north car of the cut was considerably damaged. The front end of the engine was more or less damaged and the first car in the passenger train was slightly damaged. None of the equipment involved was derailed. The employees injured were the conductor, brakeman, baggageman, helper, and the train porter.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Judkins, of train No. 103, stated that after heading in at the north switch, his train came almost to a stop in order to permit the flagman to close the switch and get back on, at this time he could not see the cut of cars on account of the bank of the cut on the inside of the curve and the ascending grade. As his train continued on the passing track, he looked ahead through the side storm window and first saw the cut of cars when about 11 car-lengths from them, but thought that they were standing on the "back track". At about that time the injector broke and he shut it off, thereby momentarily diverting his attention from maintaining a lookout, and on looking ahead again, when about eight car-lengths from the cut of cars, he saw that they were on the passing track and not the "back track"; he shouted a warning of danger, and then a second warning, and the engineman moved the brake-valve handle to the emergency position, but the air brakes did

not seem to take effect prior to the collision. He estimated the speed to have been about 15 miles per hour when he first saw the cut of cars on the passing track, but could not judge what the speed was at the time of the collision. Fireman Judkins further stated that no trouble was experienced in making the stop for Mammoth Springs or to head in at the north switch of the passing track. It also appeared from his statements that it was not unusual to find cars standing on the "back track" and that about once a week a train would be found occupying the passing track, but that this was the first time he had ever found cars standing on the passing track without a crew in attendance, saying that he had never found cars on any other passing track unless the dispatcher gave notification of their presence. Fireman Judkins understood, however, that the absence of such notification did not relieve him of the duty of maintaining a proper lookout ahead, in this instance he thought that when he did not find a train at the north end of the passing track, that his own train would have a clear track.

Engineman Jacobs, of train No. 103, stated that just before starting around the curve the fireman shouted a warning of danger, twice in succession, and he immediately shut off steam and applied the air brakes in emergency, the collision occurring before the air brakes could, or just about the time that they did, take effect. He estimated the speed of his train to have been about 10 miles per hour at the time he received warning of danger, when the engine was about 35 or 40 feet from the cut of cars, saying that the speed had not been reduced at the time of the collision. The air brakes had been tested and worked properly. Engineman Jacobs also said that he could have brought his train to a stop without incident had he been given proper warning of the cut of cars, he was looking ahead out of the front window on his own side of the cab, the window being open. He further stated that he had not been notified that the cars were on the passing track, although it was customary to receive a message in such cases. Statements of other members of the crew developed nothing additional of importance.

The investigation developed that crews usually were notified of cars standing on passing tracks. In this particular case, the cut of cars had been left by work extra 34, it being intended to return for them before the arrival of train No. 103, however, Conductor Collier, of the work extra, on arrival at Williford, 18.4 miles south of Fickinger, at about 1 p.m., told the operator at that point to take a message to the effect that the cut of cars had been left on the passing track at Fickinger and to be sure to inform train No. 103 to back out, as a matter of extra precaution. The operator transmitted this information to the dispatcher's office, and Dispatcher Gentry,

who was due to go off duty at 1 p.m., was notified by the chief dispatcher while the transfer was being made out, but made no mention of it to Dispatcher Patrick, who was just coming on duty, as he assured that the latter had also heard about the matter. Dispatcher Patrick took over the transfer at about 1.03 p.m., but did not know the siding was blocked. He said it was the practice to protect passing tracks when blocked by cars, in order to prevent delay to trains going to that point to make a meet, and that had he known that the siding at Fickinger was blocked, he would have notified both train crews to that effect.

Vision tests disclosed that the fireman could have seen the cut of cars at a distance of 1,053 feet, and that he could have definitely determined upon which track they were standing at a distance of 702 feet, the engineman, being on the outside of the curve, could not have seen any portion of the cars until his cab was within 120 feet of them.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of Fireman Judkins, of train No. 103, to maintain a proper lookout while moving through the passing track.

Under the rules, trains using a siding must proceed, expecting to find it occupied. Fireman Judkins should have been maintaining a proper lookout ahead while moving through the passing track, and if he had done so, he could have seen the cut of cars on the curve and have warned the engineman of their presence in ample time to have prevented the accident; as it was, however, he assumed that the passing track would be unoccupied, and for some reason failed to notice the cars until it was too late to stop.

It was the practice to notify crews when sidings were blocked by cars, although not required by rule, and this practice would have been followed in this case had Dispatcher Patrick, on duty at the time of the accident, been informed concerning the cut of cars. The necessary information was given to Dispatcher Gentry by the chief dispatcher at the time the transfer was being made out, but Dispatcher Gentry, assuming that Dispatcher Patrick had also heard about the cut of cars, made no mention of them to Dispatcher Patrick. While the absence of notification to the crew of train No. 103 in no way excuses Fireman Judkins for his failure to maintain a proper lookout ahead, yet the lack of such notification possibly misled him ^{and caused him} to believe that the passing track was unoccupied. Errors in the making of transfers between dispatchers are likely to lead to serious results; and in this particular case, had there been a little more teamwork in the dispatchers' office, the accident probably would not have occurred.

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.