

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 MEGARGEL, ALA.,
ON FEBRUARY 3, 1929.

May 4, 1929.

To the Commission:

On February 3, 1929, there was a collision between a passenger train and a freight car standing on a spur track on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway at Megargel, Ala., which resulted in the death of one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Pensacola Sub-Division of the Southern Division, extending between Pensacola, Fla., and Magnolia, Ala., a distance of 152.3 miles, which is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The track in the vicinity of the point of accident is tangent for a distance of about 3½ miles, the switch involved in the accident being located at about the middle of this tangent. The grade is undulating, and is 0.13 per cent ascending for northbound trains at the point of accident.

The spur track parallels the main track on the west and is 832 feet in length. The switch is a facing-point switch for northbound trains and leads off the main track through a No. 10 turnout. The switch stand is of the Elliot high revolving type and is located on the east side of the main track. The target is a single disk 15 inches in diameter, the bottom of which is 5 feet above the base of the stand; the target is displayed when the switch is open and no indication is displayed when it is closed. The stand is equipped with a long time burning switch lamp and is lighted both day and night; night indications are red and green, depending on whether the switch is open or closed.

The weather was cloudy and it was dark at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 8.45 p. m.

Description

Northbound passenger train No. 908 consisted of one combination mail and baggage car, one coach, one chair car, one Pullman sleeping car and one dining car,

all of steel construction, hauled by engine 1106, and was in charge of Conductor York and Engineman Foreman. This train left Huxford, approximately 12.7 miles south of Megargel, at 6.22 p.m., three minutes late, and was traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 25 to 40 miles per hour when it entered the switch leading to the spur track at Megargel and collided with the freight car standing on that track.

The impact drove the freight car off the end of the track and considerably damaged it. The engine, tender, and the forward truck of the first car in the passenger train also ran off the end of the track but remained in upright positions; this equipment was also damaged to some extent. The employee killed was the engineman.

Summary of evidence.

Road Foreman of Equipment Reed stated that he rode on the engine of train No. 908 between Muscogee, Fla., and Megargel and that the brakes worked efficiently en route. As the train was approaching the latter point he was riding on the fireman's seat box and when within a very short distance of the spur track switch he noticed that the switch target was improperly displayed and that the switch lamp was not burning. He shouted a warning of danger to the engineman but the engineman did not apply the brakes in emergency until the train had traveled an additional distance of about two car-lengths, or about the time the engine reached the switch. He estimated the speed at the time the brakes were applied at 40 miles per hour but due to the short distance the speed was reduced only slightly before the collision occurred. After the train came to a stop he returned to the switch and found it lined for the spur track and locked in that position, the lock being in the hasp with the keyhole next to the switch lever; the switch and stand appeared to be in perfect condition. In order to ascertain whether the switch lamp had burned out, the lamp was removed from the stand and lighted and it was found that it continued to burn without making any adjustment, and he expressed the opinion that the light had been blown out and not turned out. Mr. Reed said that had this switch lamp been burning properly it could have been seen from the south for a distance of approximately 1,800 feet, but that on account of the ascending grade south of the spur track the rays of the headlight would shine above the target until the train was only 500 feet distant, when it would come into view, too late for the train to stop. He did not think the engineman saw that the switch was set for the spur track until after his attention had been called to it.

Fireman White stated that while his train was approaching the point of accident he was engaged in putting

in a fire and therefore was not in a position to observe the spur track switch. He said the engineman started sounding a road-crossing whistle signal but before completing it he let go of the whistle cord and applied the brakes in emergency, immediately after which the engine lurched to the left as it entered the spur track. The brakes were applied about two car-lengths from the switch and took hold properly, reducing the speed to some extent before the occurrence of the accident. Fireman White jumped off just before the train came to a stop and noticed considerable fire flying from the brake shoes and he also said that the headlight was burning until it struck the car standing on the spur track. After assisting in removing the engineman, which required about 15 or 20 minutes, he went back to the switch but did not examine it closely, although he noticed that the switch lamp was not burning and that the points were lined for the spur track and were fitting tightly. Fireman White further stated that this was the first time he ever experienced trouble with switches and that he had never seen anyone tampering with them. He knew of no one that held any malice toward him and who might attempt to wreck his train except possibly a negro trespasser whom he had put off the train in that vicinity about two months previously; he did not know the name of this negro but understood he had a bad reputation.

The statements of Conductor York and Brakeman Lewis were to the effect that their first intimation of anything unusual was when they felt the brakes apply, very shortly before the train entered the spur track. Conductor York estimated the speed at 35 miles per hour at the time the brakes were applied and at 30 miles per hour when the train entered the spur track while Brakeman Lewis thought the train was running at a speed of about 30 miles per hour at the time of the accident. Their statements corroborated those of Road Foreman of Equipment Reed and Fireman White as to the position and condition of the spur track switch after the accident, except that Brakeman Lewis thought the points did not fit up as closely as they should although he did not believe this condition was due to the switch having been run through. The statements of Train Porter Austin brought out no additional facts of importance.

Engineman Address, of southbound train No. 907, which was the last train to pass over the spur track switch prior to the accident, stated that he observed the target was in the clear position and that he noticed nothing unusual when his train passed over the switch, which was at about 9.40 a.m. on the day of the accident. He also said that he was the engineman on train No. 908 on the night previous to the accident and that he noticed the switch lamp involved was burning when the train passed that point.

Section Foreman McKay stated that he has charge of the section on which the accident occurred and that the track is patrolled daily except Sunday, on which day the accident occurred, and that the switch lamps are cleaned and filled twice each week. At about 4 p.m., February 2, he refilled and lighted the lamp at the spur track switch at Megargel and then tested the switch by moving it each way and again locked it in the closed position, after which he examined the points to see that they were fitting properly. His motor car had been brought to a stop south of the switch and after the switch was inspected they proceeded northward, passing over the switch; he was positive that the switch was left in normal position. He did not see this switch again until after the accident, at which time he made a thorough examination and found it in good condition, the points showing no indication of having been run through, in fact, nothing has been done to the switch since the accident. The switch lamp continued to burn after being relighted and the last time he observed it was at 6 P. M., February 5. Foreman McKay further stated that he is the only member of the section crew in possession of a switch key and he knew of no reason for any of his men to open the switch. He also said he had never experienced any trouble with anyone tampering with the track on his section, neither had he heard of any trouble of this nature on any other section.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch.

The evidence indicates that the switch lamp of the spur track switch was not burning as train No. 908 approached it, and after the accident it was found that the switch was lined for the side track and locked in that position. The lamp was then lighted without moving the wick in either direction and it continued to burn properly, and was still burning as late as February 5. The switch was in good condition, no repairs of any kind being required after the occurrence of the accident. Apparently the switch had been opened by some one in possession of a switch key; the circumstances under which the switch was opened, and the light extinguished, could not be ascertained, but at the time of the investigation the special agent's department of this railway was seeking a negro who was suspected of tampering with the switch. This negro had been giving considerable trouble by stealing rides and recently he had been taken off a train by a sheriff at the request of the train crew.

The employees involved were experienced men, at the time of the accident the train crew had been on duty 3 hours and 45 minutes after having been off duty for a period of more than 26 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.