

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 SPAULDING,
OKLA., ON APRIL 29, 1929.

September 20, 1929

To the Commission:

On April 29, 1929, there was a collision between a passenger train and an automobile truck at a grade crossing on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway at Spaulding, Okla., which resulted in the death of the driver of the automobile truck and the injury of two employees on duty, one employee off duty, one mail clerk, one express messenger and one person riding on the truck.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Creek Sub-division of the Southwestern Division, which extends between Sapulpa and Francis, Okla., a distance of 101.9 miles, and is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The point of accident was 439 feet south of the station at Spaulding, where a public highway crosses the railroad tracks at a slight angle. The highway runs directly north and south while the tracks run in a general northeast and southwest direction, according to compass direction, or north and south according to time-table direction; the latter direction is used in this report in referring to train movements. Approaching from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 4,311.9 feet followed by a 2° curve to the left 1,586.6 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 35.5 feet from its southern end. The grade for northbound trains is generally ascending, but is level at the point of accident.

At the crossing the highway passes over three tracks, known as the main, passing, and storage tracks, the main track being the first track encountered by a southbound vehicle. Approaching this crossing from the north on the highway there is a slight incline, the crossing being 2.8 feet above the ground line. The crossing is level and in fair condition. The view had by drivers of southbound vehicles of an approaching northbound train is restricted by trees located to the right of the highway and by a tool house located on the railroad right of way 21 feet from the center line of the main track and 53 feet south of the center line of the highway, the tool

house being 16 feet wide and 12 feet deep. There is a small opening between the trees and the tool house where a clear view of the track can be had for a considerable distance.

The only protection afforded at this crossing is the standard highway cross-bar sign, reading "RAILROAD CROSSING", located 16 feet west of the center line of the main track and 15 feet 8 inches south of the center line of the highway. This sign is supported by a post which extends 16 feet above the ground line and the words "LOOK OUT FOR THE CARS" are painted on the side of the post facing the approaching vehicle. A standard stop sign, required in the State of Oklahoma, is located 37 feet west of the center line of the main track and 8.5 feet south of the center line of the highway.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 2.53 p.m.

Description

Northbound passenger train No. 510 consisted of one combination mail and express car, one baggage car and two coaches, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 1032, and was in charge of Conductor German and Engineman Miller. This train departed from Sasakwa, Okla., 7.3 miles south of Spaulding, at 2.43 p.m., one minute late, according to the train sheet, and struck the truck on the crossing at Spaulding while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 15 and 25 miles per hour.

The automobile truck involved was a Chevrolet, one-ton truck, with a steel cab and wooden box bed with side boards about 16 inches in height, hauling six 55-gallon drums of gasoline. This truck, operated by Hoyle Boles, was en route to a Shell Petroleum Company station south of Spaulding and was passing over the crossing at a speed estimated to have been about 15 miles per hour when it was struck by train No. 510.

The truck was demolished and the debris came to rest on the passing track parallel with the main track, with the forward end of the truck about 32 feet north of the center of the road crossing. Two drums of gasoline exploded and the gasoline was thrown over the engine and coaches, which caught fire immediately. None of the equipment of the train was derailed. The driver of the truck was killed, and those injured were the other occupant of the truck and the engineman, fireman, mail clerk, express messenger and a fireman who was off duty, all of whom were on the passenger train.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Miller, of train No. 510, who was not questioned in detail because of the serious nature of his injuries, stated that he sounded the whistle signal at the station whistle board about 1 mile south of the station; at the road-crossing whistle board, located about 1/4 mile south of the crossing, he started to sound the road-crossing whistle and repeated this same signal shortly afterwards, as well as sounding two blasts of the whistle acknowledging a flag from the station platform. He made a brake-pipe reduction of about 7 pounds preparatory to making the station stop and thought that his train was traveling at a speed of between 15 and 20 miles per hour when the accident occurred. Engineman Miller did not see the truck until about the instant his train struck it and he did not believe the fireman saw it until it was too late to avert the accident. It also appeared from the engineman's statements that he did not apply the brakes in emergency as he realized that if he did so the coaches would stop in the fire and he knew that without such an application the train would come to a stop at the station platform and would be clear of the fire. Due to the dangerous condition of Fireman Cousins no statement was obtained from him.

Conductor German, of train No. 510, stated that approaching Spaulding the engineman sounded the station whistle when about 2 miles south of the station, after which the conductor gave him the signal to stop at Spaulding, the engineman answering with three long blasts of the whistle. The conductor then heard the engineman sound the crossing whistle signal but could not state the location of the engine at that time, nor did he know whether or not the bell was ringing. The first he knew of anything wrong was when he saw the fire as the coaches passed through it, his train coming to an ordinary stop with the engine about 350 feet beyond the point of accident. He estimated the speed at about 15 or 20 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Brakeman Hodges, of train No. 510, stated that on approaching the crossing they were traveling at a speed of about 20 or 25 miles per hour. A service application of the brakes had been made and the engineman had sounded the station whistle and then a crossing whistle signal, and before reaching the crossing he sounded a second crossing signal. The first the brakemen knew of anything wrong was when he heard an explosion and saw the flames. He further stated that he noticed that the engine bell was ringing when the train stopped after the accident.

The statements of Roadmaster Burr, who was standing on the rear platform of the last car of train No. 510 at the time of the accident, practically corroborated those of the train crew. The statements of Section Foreman Coston, who was working at a point about 1 mile south of Spaulding, brought out nothing additional of importance.

John Keener, who was riding on the truck, stated that he boarded it near Konawa. The driver stopped at a store just west of the tracks for water and they then proceeded southward on the highway, stopped at the foot of the approach to the crossing at which time the driver shifted the gears to second speed, and then proceeded up the incline to the tracks. Mr Keener stated that he was sitting on the right side of the truck cab, which would be on the side nearest the approaching train, but that he did not see the train until just before the accident occurred, neither did he hear any whistles sounded nor the bell ringing before reaching the crossing.

E. R. Bryant, an eye-witness to the accident, stated that he was sitting on the porch at a store located near the crossing when he noticed the truck drive up from the north and stop at a store on that side of the crossing, where water was obtained for the truck. He then heard a whistle south of the crossing, one long blast of the whistle, and he judged the train was then from 600 to 900 feet from the crossing. At about that time the truck started ahead and he kept watching the truck and the train as they approached. The truck did not slow down until it was on the track and then the accident occurred. He estimated the speed of both the train and the truck to have been about 15 miles per hour. Mr. Bryant further stated that when the truck was about 50 feet from the crossing the driver could have seen the train for a distance of 225 or 300 feet, but at a point 20 feet from the track his view was obstructed by the tool house until he was within 15 feet of the track, when he could have had a clear view. The truck did not stop at the stop sign, but was moving all the time from the time it left the store until it was struck by the train.

Irvin Stobaugh, an eye-witness to the accident, corroborated the statements of E. R. Bryant as to the operation of the truck. He was at the store when the truck stopped for water and had heard the train whistle before the truck left the store, although he said that after the one blast of the whistle he did not pay much attention to the train and was unable to state whether or not the whistle was sounded again.

The statements of Mrs. Bernice Stewart, who witnessed the accident from the station platform at Spaulding, substantiated those of the other eye-witnesses. Mrs. Stewart further stated that she heard the whistle signal sounded for the trestle located some distance south of the crossing then the signal for the crossing, and two blasts of the whistle in answer to a flag signal given from the station platform. The truck left the store after she heard the whistle signal sounded for the crossing.

Mrs. Earl Coston, a resident of Spaulding, stated that while sitting inside her house looking out of a window, which was shut, she heard an engine whistle but could not say how many times or where the engine was with respect to the crossing when the whistle was sounded. She observed the truck leave the store north of the crossing, approach the crossing at a low rate of speed, and drive up on the track without stopping at any time after leaving the store.

Mrs. P. G. Cahill, Mrs. Lette Coston, Mrs. J. F. Evans, and Arnett Weaver, all of whom live at Spaulding, stated that they heard several blasts of the whistle sounded for the crossing, as was the usual case, but none of them was paying any particular attention to the approach of the train and did not witness the accident, nor were any of them able to state whether the engine bell was ringing.

W. H. Gladden, constable of Bilby Township, stated that on the day of the accident he was sitting in his automobile, located at a point 55 feet from the center line of the crossing, and when train No. 510 was 1,090 feet south of the crossing only the smoke stack of the engine could be seen, when the train was at a point 540 feet from the crossing the front end of the train and the tops of the coaches could be seen.

A. F. Edison, agent for the Shell Petroleum Company at Konawa, Okla., stated that Mr. Boles was employed by him and had been in his employ as a truck driver for about six months, and that he had always considered him to be a careful driver. At the time he hired Boles he instructed him to be careful and not to pick up any passengers along the road and he had never known him to do so nor did he know that he had picked up Keener until after the accident. He also stated that he had ridden with Boles several times and although he did not come to a full stop at all railroad crossings he would always slow down practically to a stop, shift gears and look both ways before proceeding over the crossing. Boles made on average of one trip a week through Spaulding.

Vision tests were made after the occurrence of the accident and it developed that a train approaching from the south could be seen a distance of 3,000 feet from a point in the center of the highway where it crosses the main track. Observations made every 25 feet from the crossing, up to and including a point 200 feet distant on the highway, showed that the most restricted view was from a point 50 feet from the main track, from which point a train could be seen for a distance of only 175 feet.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the driver of an automobile truck proceeding upon a railroad crossing at grade directly in front of an approaching train.

The only protection afforded at this crossing is the regular cross-bar sign and the State highway stop sign, and the weight of evidence indicates that Driver Boles did not stop at this sign as required by the law of the State of Oklahoma. While the view is somewhat obstructed, tests made subsequent to the occurrence of the accident indicated that had the driver stopped, and had he then taken the proper precautions, he could have heard and seen the approaching train in ample time to have prevented the accident.

All of the employees of the railway 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.