INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE TEXAS & PACIFIC RAILWAY AT DONALDSONVILLE, LA., ON NOVEMBER 6, 1927.

December 14, 1927.

To the Commission:

On November 6, 1927, there was a collision between a passenger train and a cut of freight cars on the Texas & Pacific Railway at Donaldsonville, La., resulting in the death of one employee and the injury of five passengers and one employee.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Alexandria Sub-division extending between New Orleans and Addis, La., a distance of 90.1 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident 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 on the house track at Donaldsonville, at a point 421 feet west of the house-track switch. Approaching this switch from the east there is a 0° 30' curve to the left 3,336.6 feet in length followed by a long tangent, the switch being located on this tangent at a point 592 feet from its eastern end. The grade approaching the switch is slightly ascending for westbound trains.

The house track, a stub-end siding 2,772 feet in length, leads off the main track to the north or right through a No. 9 turnout, the switch being a facing-point switch for westbound trains. The old style Elliott switch stand is located on the north side of the main track and is equipped with targets which are 15 inches square and display a green indication when the switch is closed and a red indication when the switch is open. The distance from the base of the rail to the center of the targets is 5 feet 6 inches. A clear view of the switch targets can be had from the engineman's side of the cab of a westbound engine for a distance of 1,188 feet. There is a crossover switch at a point 110 feet east of the house-track switch while other main-track switches are located 422 and 1,052 feet east of the house-track switch The speed of passenger trains is limited to 50 miles per hour and no additional restrictions are made while moving within yard limits

At the time of the accident there was a cut of 25 freight cars standing on the house track, the east end of this cut being 421 feet west of the house-track switch.

The weather was clear and the sun was shining at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 11 a. m.

Description

Westbound passenger train first No. 47 consisted of one combination baggage and mail car, two coaches and two baggage and express cars, in the order named, hauled by engine 253, and was in charge of Conductor Levee and Engineman Van Hees. The first three cars were of wooden construction and the others were of built-up steel construction. This train left St. James, the last open office, 12.4 miles east of Donaldsonville, at 10.41 a.m., one hour and six minutes late, and on reaching Donaldsonville it entered the house-track switch, which was open, and collided with the cut of standing freight cars while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 15 and 30 miles per hour

The east car of the cut was telescoped its entire length by engine 253, the next freight car had its ends driven in, the third freight car was demolished and the fourth had its east truck derailed. The fourth to the twenty-fifth freight cars, inclusive, were driven ahead a distance of 525 feet. Engine 253 was derailed but came to rest in an upright position inside the body of the first freight car, and was considerably damaged. None of the cars in the passenger train was derailed nor badly damaged. The employee killed was the fireman of train first No. 47.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Van Hees, of train first No. 47, said that his first knowledge of anything wrong was on seeing a streak of red displayed by the switch target, this streak appearing to be about 1 inch wide. This caused him to feel that the switch was open and he applied the air brakes in emergency, at which time the speed was about 50 miles per hour, with the engine not more than 250 or 300 feet away from the switch. In another instant he definitely ascertained that the switch points were lined for the house track and he shouted to the fireman that the switch was open. Engineman Van Hees thought that the engine would be derailed at the switch but it remained on the track and collided with the cut of freight cars while traveling at a speed of about 30 miles per hour. Engineman Van Hees said that he was maintaining a proper lookout ahead, trying to see everything at Donaldsonville, particularly in view of the fact that his train was approaching at a speed of about 50 miles per hour.

Conductor Levee, of train first No. 47, stated that the first intimation he had of anything wrong was when the air-brake application was made, at a point he estimated to have been about 500 feet east of the house-track switch. He immediately looked out and saw the engine heading in at the switch, the target of which was displaying a red indication. After the accident he saw that the switch was open, with the lever in the socket and the lock in the hasp, unlocked. Conductor Levee estimated the speed of the train to have been about 45 miles per hour at the time the brakes were applied, and between 35 and 40 miles per hour when the train headed in at the switch. Brakeman McTague thought that the air-brake application was made when about six or eight car-lengths east of the switch, at which time the speed was between 35 and 40 miles per hour; after the accident he went back to flag and on his way back he noticed that the switch target was displaying a red indication, with the switch open, the lever in the socket and the lock in the hasp, unlocked. The statements of Train Porter Dwellingham corroborated those of Conductor Levee and Brakeman McTague as to the condition of the switch and its appurtenances after the accident occurred. Train Porter Dwellingham estimated the speed of the train to have been between 35 and 40 miles per hour before the air brakes were applied and between 15 and 20 miles per hour when the accident occurred.

On the morning of the accident yard engine 354 was working in the vicinity and it had been backed in on the house track and was standing on that track when eastbound train No. 46 departed at 10.10 a.m. It then headed out on the main track, proceeded as far as the crossover switch 110 feet east of the house-track switch, backed in through this crossover to a connection track, and was engaged in switching on various tracks in the yard when the accident occurred.

Switchman Finn, of yard engine 354, stated that he was the one who opened the house-track switch and that he then gave Fireman Ott a proceed signal. After the engine had headed out on the main track he closed the switch but did not lock it. He then walked eastward behind the switch engine to the crossover switch, opened it and then closed it after the engine had backed in on the crossover. Switchman Finn then proceeded westward to the inside switch of the crossover and opened and closed this switch for the purpose of allowing the engine to proceed westward to the transfer track. Switchman Finn stated that he was familiar with the rules wherein it is required that main-track switches be left properly locked and that he had never been instructed not to lock them, but he said that when the engine left the house track he knew that it would return there as soon as train No. 47 had passed, and that it was customary under such circumstances not to lock the switch in question.

Switchman Finn steadfastly maintained that after yard engine 354 headed out of the house track he closed the switch, placed the lock in the hasp but did not lock it, observed that the switch points fitted properly, and then walked eastward behind the switch engine to the crossover switch, and it was his opinion that some one tampered with the switch after he closed it.

Engineman Lyons, of yard engine 354, stated that after eastbound train No. 46 had passed on the main track, Switchman Finn opened the house-track switch and the engine headed out on the main track, moving very slowly in order to give the switchman a chance to close the switch and get on the rear footboard. The fireman then said "All right, go ahead," and Engineman Lyons took it for granted that the switch had been closed and proceeded eastward at a speed of about 2 miles per hour. He brought the engine to a stop just east of the crossover switch, reversed the engine, released the brakes and the fireman then told him to back the engine. Engineman Lyons backed the engine in on the crossover and stopped, and he said he saw Switchman Finn close and lock the main-track crossover switch, after which the switchman lined the inside crossover switch and the switch engine backed westward to the transfer track. Engineman Lyons stated that the switch engine was headed east and that as the house-track switch stand was located on the north side of the main track he had not been able to see whether Switchman Finn closed the house-track switch, and he also said that he did not see any one walk ahead of his engine from the house-track switch to the crossover switch, had Switchman Finn preceded the engine between these two switches it would have indicated that he did not stop to close the house-track switch after the engine headed out on the main track.

Fireman Ott, of yard engine 354, stated that Switchman Finn opened the house-track switch and after the engine headed out on the main track he saw the switchman close the switch. At first Fireman Ott said that after this had been done the switchman walked behind the engine to the main-track crossover switch and handled that switch for the engine to back through the crossover, but later the fireman said that he was not certain whether the switchman walked behind the engine, although he thought this was the case. Fireman Ott also stated that several minutes after the engine had backed through the crossover he looked across from the transfer track and noticed that both the house-track switch and the main-track crossover switch targets were displaying green signals, indicating that these switches were properly closed for the main track. Fireman Ott was emphatic in his statement that he saw Switchman Finn close the house-track switch after the switch engine had headed out on the main track.

Engine Foreman Leathem, of switch engine 354, stated that Switchman Finn opened the switch to let the engine out of the house track and that the switchman then walked ahead of the engine from the house-track switch to the main-track crossover switch, and later, after switchman Finn had lined the inside crossover switch, Engine Foreman Leathem saw the switchman walk over toward the house-track switch and supposed he was going to close it.

Switchman Marine, of switch engine 354, stated that Switchman Finn opened the house-track switch but he did not know whether or not Switchman Finn closed the switch afterwards. Switchman Marine said, however, that Switchman Finn did not close the house-track switch before the engine backed through the crossover switch, although he did not see Switchman Finn walk ahead of the engine en route to the crossover switch. After Switchman Finn had lined the inside crossover switch Switchman Marine saw Switchman Finn walk across the main track toward the house-track switch.

The majority of the members of the yard crew said there were several children, from 8 to 15 years of age, playing around the tracks, jumping on and off cars, and pulling cane from the cars. Switchman Finn thought some one tampered with the switch after he had closed it but Engine Foreman Leathem did not think it probable any outside person handled the switch.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by an open switch, for which Switchman Finn is responsible.

Switchman Finn said he closed the switch as soon as the yard engine had headed out on the main track, although he admitted he did not lock the switch. The statements of the other employees were conflicting: the engineman was not in position to see the switch, the fireman said he saw the switchman close it, and the other switchman and the engine foreman said he did not close it, at least at that particular time. Investigation by the railroad police failed to develop any information to indicate that the switch had been tampered with by outside parties, and it is believed that Switchman Finn failed to close the switch after it had been used. Even if his own statement were correct in all particulars, he would still be at fault for leaving the switch unlocked, thus making it possible for any one so inclined to change the position of the switch at will.

While the switch target was visible a distance of 1,188 feet, undoubtedly the fact that train first No. 47 was moving at a high rate of speed was a factor in the failure of the

enginemen of that train to see the switch target indications in time to stop before striking the cars on the house track, and under the circumstances it is not felt that this engineman can be held responsible for what occurred.

Had an adequate block-signal system been in use on this line, this accident probably would not have occurred, an adequate automatic train stop or train control device would have prevented it.

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.