

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 NEAR MELVILLE, LA., ON AUGUST 31, 1924.

October 23, 1924.

To the Commission:

On August 31, 1924, there was a side collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Texas & Pacific Railway near Melville, La., which resulted in the death of 1 passenger, and the injury of 18 passengers and 6 employees off duty.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the Alexandria Subdivision of the Louisiana Division, extending between Addis and Boyce, La., a distance of 118.7 miles; 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 about 5,479 feet west of the station at Melville, at the west switch of a passing track 4,787 feet in length, located on the south side of the main track. Approaching the point of accident from the east the track is tangent a distance of 2,241 feet, while the grade is practically level. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 2.27 a. m.

Description.

Eastbound passenger train No. 20 consisted of one mail car, one baggage car, two chair cars and three Pullman sleeping cars, hauled by engine 267, and was in charge of Conductor Stewart and Engineman Tillotson. The first, second and fourth cars were of wooden construction, while the remainder were of steel-underframe construction. This train left Rose, 16.8 miles west of Melville and the last open office, at 12.48 a. m., on time, met train No. 21 at Sambo, 4.7 miles from Melville, and on arriving at the west switch at Melville the train stopped about half way over the switch while water was taken; the engine was then cut off and pulled ahead for the purpose of taking fuel oil. While so engaged the third and fourth cars of the train were cornered by the head car of extra 366.

Westbound freight train extra 366 consisted of 91 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 336, and was in charge of Conductor Eason and Engineman Higgins. This train arrived at Melville at 12.40 a.m., where it met an eastbound freight train which was occupying the east end of the passing track, and as extra 366 was on the time of westbound passenger train No. 21 it was decided to proceed to the west end of the passing track and back in, but before clearing the main track a coupler on the sixth car from the engine was damaged and the engine was unable to back the train. The engine of train No. 21, which had arrived in the meantime, was used to haul the rear portion of extra 366 into clear. After train No. 21 departed, engine 366 pulled out on the main track with five cars and after running around its train was pushing the train westward on the passing track at a speed of about 3 or 4 miles an hour when the head car collided with the cars of train No. 20.

The head car of extra 366 was thrown off its trucks and came to rest in an upright position at right angles with the track, while the second car was partly overturned and came to rest with its steel underframe projecting into the side of the second chair car of train No. 20. The sides of the first and second chair cars of train No. 20 were badly damaged, but none of the equipment in this train was derailed.

Summary of evidence.

Conductor Eason, of extra 366, said the eastbound freight train standing at the east end of the passing track was so long they were only able to back 30 cars in on the passing track behind it and his own train stood partly on the passing track and partly on the main track until train No. 21 arrived and cleared the east switch. The eastbound freight train then started to pull out and Conductor Eason said his train was again backed in on the passing track but as his train moved faster than the eastbound train he finally had to open the conductor's valve, making a light reduction which brought his train to a stop, and it was then that the damaged coupler developed. It was decided to shove the crippled car out on the main track, place it on a siding, and then proceed. As eastbound passenger train No. 20 was due, Conductor Eason had Head Brakeman Heffner remain at the head end of the train with instructions that as soon as train No. 20 cleared the west switch he was to open it, they would then shove the crippled car out on the main track, and the train would then be pulled back into clear on the passing track. Conductor Eason said he rode with the engine and five cars to the rear of the train and instructed Rear Brakeman Williams as to the moves that were to be made when train No. 20 cleared the west switch. Conductor Eason said he then went to the telegraph office for orders after telling the engine crew what was to be done, and did not learn of the accident until after it had occurred.

Engineman Higgins said the rear brakeman got on top of the caboose when train No. 20 arrived and shortly afterwards he received a proceed signal, which he acknowledged with two blasts of the whistle, and after taking slack he started the train ahead and kept watching for signals from the brakeman, who continued giving proceed signals. After moving 8 or 10 car-lengths he thought the head end of the train should be out on the main track but did not receive any stop signals and was about to apply the brakes when he felt a slight jar and made an air-brake application. He said he was unable to see train No. 20 on account of the curve but was able to see the reflection of the headlight which appeared to be close. Fireman Gremillion corroborated the statements of Engineman Higgins. His first intimation of anything wrong was when the engineman applied the air brakes suddenly after they had moved some distance, at which time he saw a stop signal given by the rear brakeman; prior to this he had not seen any signals.

Rear Brakeman Williams said that in accordance with Conductor Eason's instructions he got on top of the caboose to be in a position to see signals and shortly after train No. 20 arrived he received a proceed signal from the ground near the head end of the train at a point between the main and passing tracks and on receiving a second signal he transmitted it to the engineman who acknowledged it and started moving the train ahead. Rear Brakeman Williams said he lost sight of the signal that he was receiving and immediately gave stop signals, just after which he felt a slight jar of the train. Receiving no further signals he walked ahead until he met Head Brakeman Heffner, who told him of the accident. Rear Brakeman Williams said he had see no other lights except that he supposed were the lanterns carried by the flagman at the rear of train No. 20. He estimated the speed of the train to have been about 4 miles an hour at the time of the collision, and also said that the air brakes were not coupled between engine 366 and the caboose.

Head Brakeman Heffner said he took up a position between the rails of the passing track until train No. 20 arrived, when he boarded the train for the purpose of purchasing some tobacco and met Conductor Stewart of that train, who asked him to assist a car man in making an inspection of a hot box, and he walked back with the car man along the north side of the train to the first Pullman car and held his lantern while the car man made an inspection. They returned to the rear chair car and were about to board the car when Head Brakeman Heffner heard Conductor Stewart shouting warnings and heard the cars of his train moving on the passing track; he crossed over to the south side of train No. 20 but the collision occurred about the time he got on the ground.

Head Brakeman Heffner estimated that train No. 20 had been standing about 10 minutes before the accident occurred, and he further said that he had not given any signals for the movement of his train nor had he seen any lights on the south side of train No. 20.

Conductor Stewart, of train No. 20, said that on the arrival of his train at Melville the engine was spotted at the water column and then was uncoupled and moved to the fuel oil column. When the train stopped he was on the rear platform of the second chair car directing a car man who was on the train to look at a hot journal, after which he went through the first chair car and on meeting Brakeman Heffner asked him to assist the car man. Conductor Stewart said he then got off the train on the south side and walked to the head end of the train and had been there but a few moments when he discovered the cars on the passing track moving westward towards his train. He said he immediately gave stop signals and shouted warnings to the passengers, and on going to the head end of the first car of the train on the passing track to open the angle cock he saw that it was already open and realized there was no air in the brake pipe; he then continued giving stop signals from the outside of the passing track until the collision occurred. Conductor Stewart said his train had been standing about three minutes before he discovered the cars moving on the passing track, also that with the exception of the flagman of his train he did not see any one about the train with a light.

Engineman Tillotson, of train No. 20, said that the porter uncoupled the engine from the train after it was spotted at the water column and the engine was then moved forward to the oil column. While taking oil, Engineman Tillotson said he got up on the tank and used a flash light to see if the tank was full, but that he made no movement with the light that could be construed as a proceed signal. While taking oil he noticed that the train on the passing track was moving but thought nothing of it as he had previously noted that there was room enough for six or eight cars at the west end of the track. He did not see any signals and did not know an accident had occurred until the engine was moved back to the train. Fireman Burdeneve said that after the engine was uncoupled the porter gave a proceed signal from the north side of the engine and he told the engineman to go ahead. He did not see any other signals, nor did he see any lights in the vicinity.

Porter Collier, of train No. 20, said he closed the angle cock from the south side, then crossed to the fireman's side and disconnected the hose, lifted the uncoupling lever and raised his lantern once as a proceed signal, boarded the engine and rode to the oil column on the stirrup step of the tender on the fireman's side, and there assisted the engine crew in taking oil. He said he did not notice the cars moving on the passing track and did not learn of the accident until the engine had returned to the train.

Car man Calhaver said trouble had been experienced with a hot box on the first Pullman car and when the stop was made at Melville Conductor Stewart asked him to look at it again and also asked Brakeman Hefner to assist him. He said he found the journal all right and with Brakeman Hefner was returning to the chair car when he heard shouts and the sound of cars moving on the passing track. Car man Calhaver estimated that the train had been standing about five minutes before the accident occurred.

Flagman Harrison said he went back to flag, carrying a red light and a white light, while oil and water were being taken. He had previously seen a light at the head end of the train which looked to be about a car-length east of the west passing-track switch, but the light disappeared and he then saw some one walking toward the head end of the train on the south side. As he was walking back to flag he heard shouts and saw stop signals being given. Flagman Harrison said he made no movement with his lights that could have been mistaken for a proceed signal.

Erie Gardner, a passenger on the train, said that when the train stopped at Melville he looked out of the coach window on the south side to see why the stop was made and saw the conductor step from the train and after looking about for an instant then begin to give a proceed signal, swinging his lantern up and down, and then walk toward the engine continuing to give these proceed signals. Mr. Gardner was of the opinion that it was a signal for the train to proceed but the engine was then uncoupled from the train and he then left his seat and was standing on the vestibule steps when he heard the conductor shouting for the passengers to get out of the cars and saw the conductor start to board one of the cars of a freight train that was moving towards their train.

A series of vision tests were made at Melville between the hours of 2.25 a.m. and 4.06 a.m., September 6, when the weather conditions were almost identical with those that obtained at the time of this accident. For this purpose a train of 91 cars and a caboose was assembled with the identical make-up of the cars of extra 366 at the time of

the accident, and placed on the passing track with the head end of the train 240 feet east of the water column, the engine and five cars being placed at the rear of the train. A seven-car passenger train, hauled by the same engine that was on train No. 20, was placed on the main track with the engine spotted at the water column. The members of the crew of extra 366 and Conductor Stewart of train No. 20 were present during these tests. Observers were placed on top of the caboose and on the engine of the train standing on the passing track and the various movements made by the members of the train crews at the time of the accident were re-enacted and it was found that in no single instance was a proceed signal given, or a signal given that could be construed as a proceed signal. The only proceed signal it is known was given prior to the accident was given by Porter Collier when he uncoupled the engine from the train and that was given on the fireman's side and was not visible to observers at the time of these tests.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by Rear Brakeman Williams giving Engineman Higgins, of extra 366, a signal to proceed without first obtaining a signal from the head end of the train indicating that the track was clear.

It appears from the testimony of the various members of the crew of extra 366 that they were familiar with the movements that were to be made after train No. 20 cleared the west switch of the passing track, and that shortly after the train arrived at the water column Rear Brakeman Williams gave a proceed signal to the engineman, claiming that he received a proceed signal from the head end of the train. While it appears from the statement of a passenger that the conductor of that train gave a number of proceed signals, the preponderance of testimony is to the effect that no proceed signals were given by him and it is believed in the absence of proof of a more convincing nature, that Rear Brakeman Williams mistook some of the lights in the vicinity for a proceed signal. Had Head Brakeman Heffner remained with his train it is possible he could have prevented the occurrence of this accident.

None of the employees involved in this accident had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of serve law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.