

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
LINE OF THE UNION TRACTION COMPANY OF INDIANA NEAR
PONETO, IND., ON NOVEMBER 16, 1926

December 27, 1926

To the Commission

On November 16, 1926, there was a head-end collision between two freight trains on the line of the Union Traction Company of Indiana near Poneto, Ind., which resulted in the injury of five employees.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Union Division, which extends between Muncie and Bluffton, Ind., a distance of 41.95 miles, this is a single-track electric line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block signal system being in use. Superiority of trains is not conferred by direction. The accident occurred at a point about 346 feet north of the north switch of a siding known as Bell, which is located about one-half mile south of Poneto, approaching this point from the north there is a $3^{\circ} 12'$ curve to the right 1,110.9 feet in length, followed by a tangent 2,477.9 feet in length, the accident occurred on this tangent at a point 1,536 feet from its northern end. Approaching from the south there is a 1° curve to the right 1,201.3 feet in length, followed by the tangent on which the accident occurred. The grade was 0.1 per cent descending for northbound trains at the point of accident.

The weather was dark and a light rain was falling at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 5:15 a.m.

Description

Southbound freight train extra 604 consisted of three cars, hauled by motor 604, and was in charge of Conductor Cook and Motorman Robbins. At Bluffton, 7.19 miles north of Bell siding, the crew of this train received a copy of train order No. 2 directing them to meet extra 49 at Bell siding. Extra 604 departed from Bluffton at 4:53 a.m., and was approaching the siding at Bell when it collided with extra 49 while traveling at a speed estimated at about 4 miles an hour.

Northbound freight train extra 49 consisted of three cars, hauled by Indiana Service Corporation motor 49, and was in charge of Conductor Hudson and Motorman Vermillion. This train left Hartford City at 4:12 a. m., the crew having received a copy of train order No. 3, previously referred to, at that point. After being delayed about 30 minutes at Montpelier, about 7 miles south of the point of accident, extra 49 departed from that point, passed Bell siding and collided with extra 604 while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 15 and 40 miles an hour.

Motor 49 was the only car derailed, but immediately after the accident fire broke out in the wreckage and consumed all of the equipment except the rear car of the northbound train.

Summary of evidence

Motorman Vermillion, of extra 49, stated that the conductor copied the order received at Hartford City, read it aloud, and then gave him a copy of it, and he said he understood its contents. After a short delay at Montpelier his train departed from that point, at which time the conductor was riding in the compartment just behind him, but the meet order was not discussed while en route to Bell. While approaching Bell siding he observed the reflection of the headlight of the approaching southbound train and again looked at his order to verify its contents, but he said that before his train reached the siding he fell asleep and that his train continued beyond the siding and collided with the opposing train while moving at a speed of 35 or 40 miles an hour, with the power fully turned on. At no time did the conductor call his attention to the meeting point with the southbound train, as required by the rules, and he further stated that this particular conductor frequently failed to call his attention to such orders when handling freight trains. Motorman Vermillion understood clearly that his train was to enter Bell siding, as there was a portable sub-station located on the northern end of the siding which would prevent the southbound train from entering the siding at that end.

Conductor Hudson, of extra 49, stated that he received the train order in question and informed the brakeman as to its contents, but that he had no conversation with either the motorman or the brakeman after leaving Montpelier. When his train was about 1 mile south of the point of collision he thought of the meet order, at which time he stationed himself in the second compartment, near the motorman, and began separating his waybills, but he failed to give the meeting point bell signal required by the rules. Conductor Hudson was relying upon the motorman

to stop the train in time to head in on the siding so as to permit the southbound train to pass, and did not realize that his train had passed the meeting point until he heard the noise as it passed the sub-station on the northern end of the siding, traveling at a speed of about 15 miles an hour, and he said it was then too late for him to do anything toward stopping the train. Conductor Hudson further stated that this was the first time he had ever failed to call a motorman's attention to a meeting point and said that had it been done in this instance the accident probably would have been averted.

Brakeman Collins, of extra 49, stated that he was not in the station at Hartford City when the train order was received and was not informed of its contents, but he overheard a remark made by Motorman Vermillion to Conductor Hudson indicating that they were to meet a southbound train at Bell siding. He did not know conductors were required to show train orders to their brakemen and said that when he was acting as conductor it had not been customary for him to do so, although the rules require conductors to read to their brakemen all train orders received. His other statements brought out no additional facts of importance.

Motorman Robbins, of extra 604, stated that at Bluffton he received an order to run extra to Hartford City and meet extra 49 at Bell, and he was under the impression that the northbound train would take the siding at Bell on account of the fact that the north end of the siding was blocked by the portable sub-station. Upon reaching a point about one-half mile north of Poneto he observed the reflection of a headlight, which he thought was from the northbound train. He operated his train through Poneto at a speed of between 5 and 6 miles an hour, then increased the speed, and after leaving the curve south of Poneto, at which point the headlight of extra 49 was plainly visible, he again shut off the power. At this time his conductor was standing beside him discussing the meeting point, but he did not realize extra 49 had passed the meeting point until the two trains were only a short distance from each other. He then applied the brakes and thought he had reduced the speed to 5 or 6 miles an hour when the collision occurred. The statements of Conductor Cook, of extra 604, practically corroborated those of Motorman Robbins.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure of the crew of extra 49 to obey a meet order, for which Motorman Vermillion and Conductor Hudson are responsible.

Under the rules of this company there is no superiority of trains by direction and a train arriving at a meeting point has no right to the main track beyond the switch it would use if it were to head in on the siding, it being the practice to leave to the judgment of the crews the question of which train is to take siding, although as a matter of fact the train first to reach the meeting point is the one usually to take siding. In this particular case, however, there was a portable transformer blocking the northern end of the siding, making it impossible for southbound trains to use the siding except by pulling by and backing in, for this reason it was the intention of the crew of the northbound train to head in on the siding and allow the southbound train to continue on the main track. Both the motorman and conductor of extra 49 fully understood that they were to meet southbound extra 604 at Bell siding, but the motorman fell asleep when approaching that point in spite of the fact that he had already observed the headlight of the opposing train when it was some distance away. The conductor was in the compartment adjacent to the motorman but was engaged in clerical work instead of paying attention to the fulfillment of the meet order, with the result that he was unaware of the location of his train until it was passing the northern end of the siding. It was then too late to avert the accident; in fact, the evidence indicated that power was still being used on this train when the accident occurred.

Brakeman Collins of extra 49 said he had overheard a conversation between the conductor and the motorman to the effect that they were to meet an opposing train at Bell, but he was not sufficiently interested to find out definitely or to pay close attention to the operation of his train as it approached the meeting point. It also appeared from his statements that when he acted as conductor he did not make it a practice to show his orders to brakemen, not knowing that such action is required under the rules. The proper handling of train orders is of paramount importance and an employee who is not fully conversant with the rules relating to train orders is not qualified to act as a conductor.

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

None of the employees involved had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law, although Motorman Vermillion had had no sleep for a period of nearly 31 hours, this being due to the fact that after a good night's rest on the night of November 14 he awoke at about 3.30 a.m., November 15, and was then awake until he went on duty at 5 o'clock that afternoon, at the time of the accident, therefore, he had been on duty about 13 hours and 15 minutes. With the exception of Brakeman Collins all the employees had been in service for one or more years.

Respectfully submitted,

W P FORLAND

Director.