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## INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

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### REPORT OF THE CHIEF OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY COVERING INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED AT AN INTERSECTION OF THE VICKSBURG, SHREVEPORT & PACIFIC RAILROAD AND THE LOUISIANA & NORTH WEST RAILROAD AT GIBBSLAND, LA, ON FEBRUARY 18, 1920

MARCH 24, 1920

#### *To the Commission*

On February 18, 1920, there was a side collision between a passenger train on the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad and a mixed train on the Louisiana & North West Railroad at Gibbsland, La, which resulted in the death of 2 and the injury of 15 persons who were on the station platform, and the injury of 3 employees. After investigation of this accident, I respectfully submit the following report.

The second district of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad, on which this accident occurred, extends from Monroe, La, to Shreveport, La, a distance of 96.7 miles. It is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. At Gibbsland this railroad crosses the Louisiana & North West Railroad at an angle of about 45°, the track of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad running approximately east and west at this point, and the track of the Louisiana & North West Railroad running approximately northwest and southeast. It was at this intersection that the accident occurred. The Gibbsland passenger station is located at the intersection on the south side of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad and on the west side of the Louisiana & North West Railroad, and serves as a union station. No interlocking plant or gates are in use for the protection of the crossing, but trains of both railroads are required by special time-table instructions to be brought to a stop not more than 200 feet before reaching the crossing.

Approaching the point of accident from the east on the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad the track is straight for about 2½ miles. The grade is level a distance of about 1,000 feet, followed by 2,900 feet of 0.25 per cent descending grade and then about 3,300 feet of 0.06 per cent ascending grade to the point of accident. A caution board is located about 3,000 feet east of the intersection and

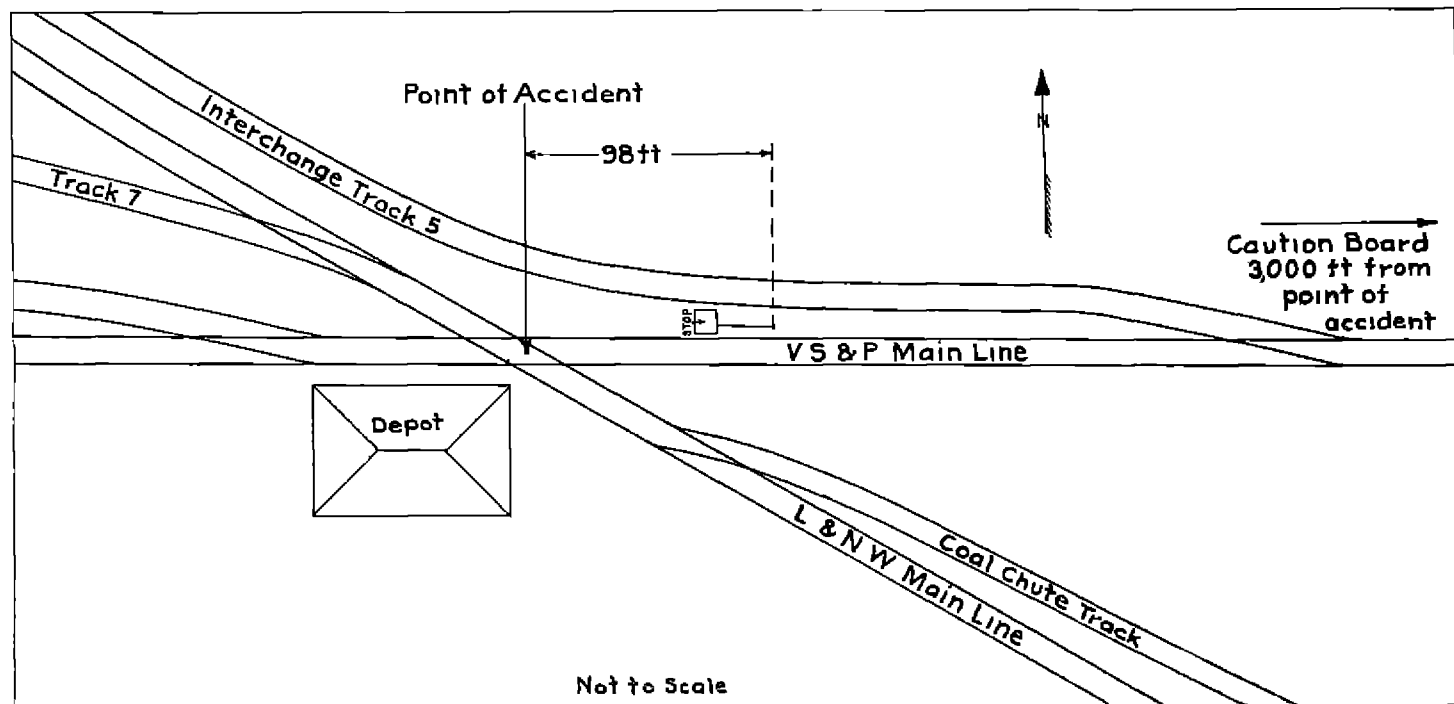


Diagram showing relative position of the tracks in the vicinity of the crossing

a stop board about 98 feet east thereof The accompanying diagram shows the relative position of the tracks in the vicinity of the crossing Illustration No 1 shows the clear view had by approaching trains on the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad, on the right is the caution board Illustration No 2 is a view taken from the track of the same railroad about 200 feet from the crossing, on the

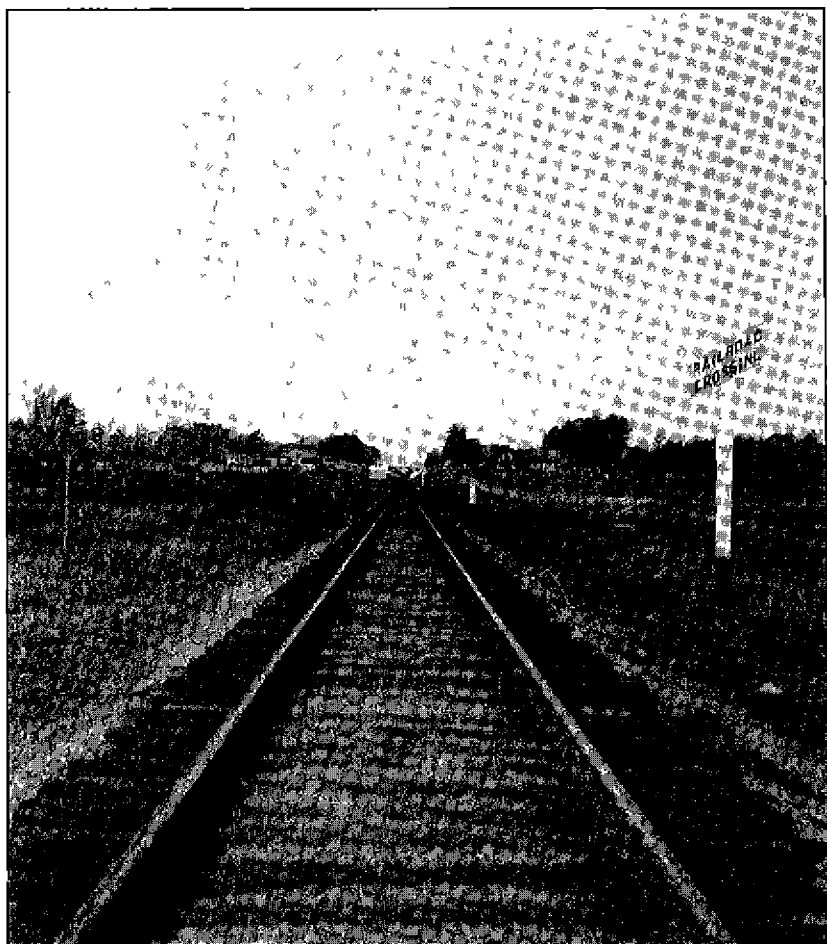


FIG 1—View approaching crossing on line of the V, S & P R R, taken from point 3,000 feet distant, on the right is the caution board

right of the track is the stop board On the line of the Louisiana & North West Railroad, at a point about 40 feet north of the intersection yard track 7 leads off from the main line to the west and about 50 feet south of the intersection a coal-chute track leads off to the east of the main track With the exception of the engine crew of one of the trains involved, the statements of the employees of the two trains indicated that the weather was clear

Southbound mixed train extra 22, of the Louisiana & North West Railroad, was in charge of Conductor Weaver and Engineman Hat-taway and consisted of engine 22, 17 freight cars, and a coach. This train arrived at Gibbsland at about 1 25 a m and was brought to a stop with the rear end at the station platform just south of the crossing. A few minutes later the train was backed about 5 car lengths, so that the coach was into clear on track 7 and the fourth car ahead of the coach, a gondola, was standing on the crossing. The train had been standing in this position about four minutes, and the coach was being uncoupled from the train and coupled to a caboose which was standing on track 7, when the gondola standing

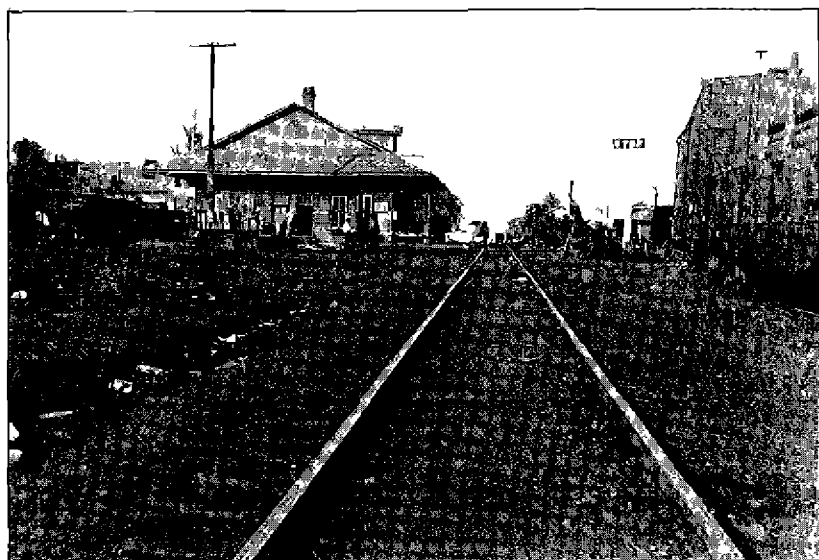


FIG. 2—View approaching crossing on line of the V S & P R R, taken from point 200 feet distant on the right is the stop board

on the crossing was struck by westbound passenger train No 11 of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad.

Westbound passenger train No 11, of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad, was in charge of Conductor Berkley and Engineman Porter and consisted of engine 308, 1 baggage car, 1 mail and express car, 1 combination car, 2 coaches, 1 sleeping car, and 1 dining car, in the order named. This train left Monroe, La., at 11 30 p m, 2 hours and 30 minutes late, left Ruston, the last open telegraph office, 24 7 miles east of Gibbsland, at 12 44 a m, and at about 1 35 a m, while running at a speed variously estimated at from 8 to 40 miles an hour, collided with extra 22 of the Louisiana & North West Railroad.

The gondola was knocked from its trucks and pushed along the station platform, coming to rest with one end across the main line while the other end crashed into the front of the station. The three cars directly behind this car and the front end of the coach were derailed, but remained in general line with the track. The coach was quite badly damaged as was also the caboose behind it, which was standing against a cut of loaded coal cars. The engine of the passenger train was derailed and quite badly damaged, coming to rest on its right side with the smokestack inside the station and the cab across the main track. Illustration No 3 shows the condition of the engine after it had been rerailed. The tender remained coupled to

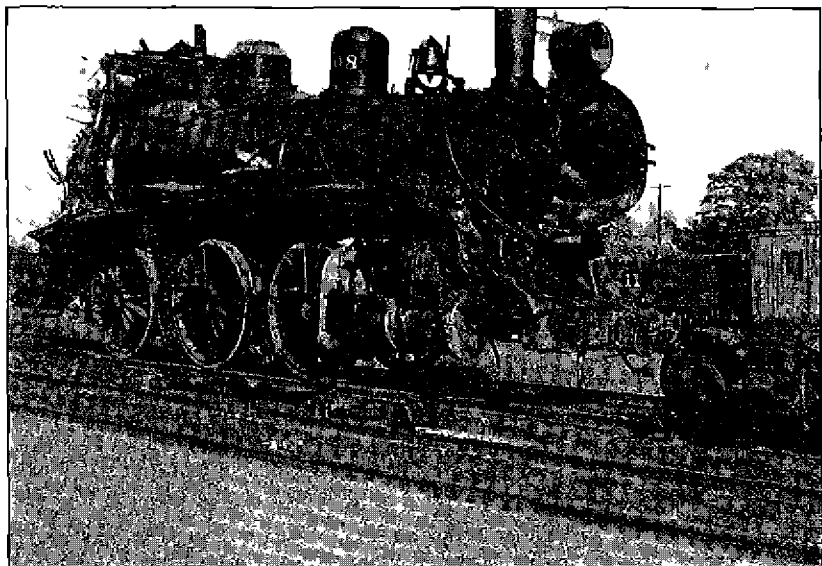


FIG 3—Engine 308 of V, S & P passenger train No 11

the engine and lay on the north side of the track on its right side, the tender frame was demolished and the cistern was badly crushed. The mail and express car, the second car in the passenger train, was derailed but none of the remaining cars in this train was derailed or damaged. Illustration No 4 is a general view of the crossing after it had been cleared of the wreckage. The damaged coach in the background is the coach which was on the rear end of Louisiana & North West extra 22 and is in the same place it stood at the time of the accident.

Engineman Hattaway, of extra 22, stated that his train arrived at Gibbsland at about 1 25 a m and stopped for about 2 minutes. He then received a signal to back up, and moved backward about 5 car lengths. He was looking back for signals from the rear end of

his train and did not notice the approach of train No 11 before the collision occurred, about three or four minutes after his train had backed over the crossing. He stated that there was no fog, but he believed that Engineman Porter of train No 11 did not see the cars on the crossing until about 10 or 15 car lengths from them, and that he intended to proceed over the crossing without making the required stop. His train was not required to be protected against trains of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad while occupying the crossing.

Fireman Roman, of extra 22, stated that he was putting in a fire and did not see or hear train No 11 approaching prior to the col-



FIG. 4.—General view of crossing and wreckage after tracks had been cleared, on the left is the platform of the station

lision. He also stated that the weather was clear at the time of the accident and that he noticed no fog.

Conductor Weaver, of extra 22, stated that his train arrived at Gibbsland at 1:25 a. m. and came to a stop with the coach, the last car in the train, about one-half car length south of the intersection. After standing there three or four minutes while passengers were getting aboard he gave the engineman a signal to back up in order that the coach might be placed on track 7 while the remainder of the train was being taken to the coal-chute track. The conductor said that he was on the west side of the train while the brakeman was attempting to uncouple the coach, and that on seeing the headlight of train No 11 over the cars in his train, he called to the brakeman to get out of the way, train No 11 was about a car length away

when he first saw the headlight. The accident occurred about five minutes after his train had backed over the crossing. He also stated that there was no fog.

Flagman Hodge, of extra 22, stated that after his train pulled south of the crossing at Gibbsland he opened the switch leading to track 7, where the coach on the rear end of his train was to be placed. He then flagged his train back over the crossing and saw no train coming from either direction on the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad. He was endeavoring to uncouple the coach, but had not succeeded in doing so when he heard two short blasts of a whistle which he thought was sounded from the engine of his train. He jumped out from between the cars, and the collision followed immediately. He knew nothing of the approach of train No. 11 prior to the accident, which he thought occurred about two or three minutes after his train had backed over the crossing. He said the weather was clear.

Brakeman Warren, of extra 22, stated that he knew nothing of the approach of train No. 11 until he heard two short blasts of the whistle just before the accident occurred. He said the weather was clear.

Brakeman Shelton, of extra 22, stated that the first intimation he had of the approach of train No. 11 was the sound of the whistle, which was followed immediately by the collision. In regard to the weather he said that it looked foggy, but not very much so.

Engineman Porter, of train No. 11, made the following statement shortly after the accident occurred:

When I came in sight of the crossing the crossing was clear. I slowed down to about 1 or 2 miles an hour, but did not come to a dead stop, then blew for the crossing at the crossing board, supposed to be about 200 feet. Blowed for the crossing twice, then pulled the engine wide open to get over the hill on account of this hard pull, and was making about 8 or 10 miles per hour and the Louisiana & North West train was moving, they tell me, going north. I never did see his engine, he never had any lights. There weren't any lights out there. I was knocked out when we hit. Never saw any sign of his train before we hit. I had engine No. 308. The headlight was good and burning good. Everybody seen it. It couldn't have been possible that I was looking over his gondolas, because I could have seen them. I understand that he was standing there for some time and started backing up when I blew for the crossing. It is possible on account of working steam on my engine on this up hill pull, that he backed over the crossing when we were so close to him that I did not see him. I blew a station whistle about the usual distance from the station and then when I got within about 150 or 200 feet from the crossing board I blew two short blasts for the crossing and was rolling about 1 or 2 miles an hour and the crossing was clear. I then opened my engine wide to get over the hard pull for this hill, and was making between 8 and 10 miles when the crash came, which is all that I know of the accident, for, as above stated, I did not see the train until we struck it. I do not know how many cars of the Louisiana &

North West train were south of our tracks or how many were north of our tracks, nor do I know on which end of his train was the Louisiana & North West engine, nor which way the engine was headed

Later Engineman Porter stated the air brakes and headlight on his train and all of the equipment within the cab were operating properly with the exception of the sanders, which were giving trouble. The engine was slipping badly and he was using the independent sand lever located behind the lubricator. He said that approaching Gibbsland the fog was very thick and he had difficulty in knowing where he was. He brought the train to a full stop at some point east of Gibbsland, but did not know exactly where, although he thought his train consumed about five minutes after proceeding and before reaching the crossing, he also sounded the crossing whistle. He was unable to see the caution board or other landmarks and was even unable to see the trees along the right of way. Just before the collision occurred the fog parted in front of him and he saw something cross the track which looked to him like a white cow. He immediately applied the brakes in emergency and reversed the engine, but the reverse lever failed to catch in the quadrant. He estimated the speed at the time of the collision at about 15 or 18 miles an hour. Engineman Porter further stated that he had never crossed over this intersection without making the required stop.

Fireman Gunn, of train No. 11, stated that approaching Gibbsland the engineman sounded the station whistle about 1,000 feet from the crossing and then reduced the speed of the train slightly by shutting off steam and applying the air brakes. At this time he was putting in a fire, and when he had finished and sat down on his seat box, the train was within about 150 yards of the crossing and he saw the cars on the crossing, he estimated the speed at 15 or 20 miles an hour, and said that it was about at this time that the engineman applied the brakes in emergency and reversed the engine. Fireman Gunn further stated that it was a little foggy on the night of the accident, but not sufficiently so to obscure the vision in any way. At another point in his testimony he said that it was possible to see a distance of about 200 feet through the fog and he thought the fog was the cause of Engineman Porter's failure to see extra 22 on the crossing. He also said that Engineman Porter had always been in the habit of stopping for the crossing, but did not do so on this occasion.

Conductor Berkley, of train No. 11, stated that the brakes on the train were tested at Monroe and no trouble was experienced in making station stops between Monroe and Gibbsland. Approaching Gibbsland he heard the engineman sound the station whistle signal, but the train was not brought to a stop and he did not know that it



was close to the crossing until he felt the brakes applied in emergency, followed immediately by the collision. He estimated the speed at the time of the collision at about 20 miles an hour. Immediately afterward he looked at his watch and it was then 1 35 a m. He said that it was dark at the time but he noticed no fog and could see lights plainly. The engineman said to him after the accident, "I could not hold them." In the opinion of Conductor Berkley, the engineman saw only the box cars which were on each side of the gondola cars which were extending across the track and, as he was looking on a level with the tops of the box cars, he did not see the gondola cars until too late to avoid the collision. Conductor Berkley was very emphatic in saying that it was the custom for enginemen to stop before reaching the crossing as required by rule.

Flagman Griggs, of train No 11, stated that Engineman Porter sounded the station whistle about two minutes before the collision occurred, but made no application of the brakes until just a few seconds before the collision occurred. He stated further that Engineman Porter was running the train unusually fast approaching Gibbsland and made no stop before reaching the crossing. He said that he did not notice any fog in the vicinity. Train Porter Chocklin's statements agreed with those of Flagman Griggs.

Train Baggage-master Patton, of train No 11, stated that Engineman Porter did not bring the train to a stop before reaching the crossing at Gibbsland. He said that the weather was clear.

Engineman Cobb, of Louisiana & North West extra 24, stated that his train arrived at Gibbsland at 12 40 a m and after switching until 1 30 a m the train was tied up on the coal-chute track. He said that he was on his engine at the time of the accident and saw the headlight of train No 11 when the train was about a mile away, and heard the station whistle sounded. He did not occupy a position which enabled him to state positively whether or not the train was brought to a stop before reaching the crossing, the next time he saw the engine being when it was within 4 or 5 car lengths of the crossing, moving at a speed of 30 or 40 miles an hour. Just previous to this he had heard the engine working steam, and he thought that about 15 or 20 seconds elapsed between the time the engine was working steam and the time the air brakes were applied in emergency. The collision occurred exactly at 1 36 a m. He stated that the weather was clear.

Fireman Lyons, of Louisiana & North West extra 24, stated that he saw the headlight of train No 11 when the train was about 2 miles from the station. He watched the train from this time until the time of the collision, and said that it did not come to a stop before reaching the crossing and that the engineman did not shut off steam until within about two car lengths of it, when two short blasts of the

whistle were sounded and a brake application was made, he estimated the speed of train No 11 at about 35 miles an hour. He also stated that extra 22 had been standing on the crossing three or four minutes. The weather was clear and the stars were shining, while the electric headlight of train No 11 was burning brightly and was shining directly on the gondola cars on the crossing. In his opinion train No 11 would have been unable to make the station stop.

Conductor Cam, of Louisiana & North West extra 24, stated that he saw train No 11 approaching Gibbsland when it was about 100 yards away, at which time the engine was working steam. He stated that steam was shut off about 50 yards from the crossing, and that just prior to the collision the engineman sounded two short blasts of the whistle, but the collision occurred before the second blast had been completed. He estimated the speed at 35 or 40 miles an hour. He said the weather was clear, and that the headlight of train No 11 was properly focused and was shining on the cars standing on the crossing. No crossing stop had been made by train No 11.

Flagman Jones, of Louisiana & North West extra 24, stated that he saw the headlight of train No 11 when it was about 2 miles from the station. He was on the west side of extra 22 and could not observe the approach of train No 11, but knew that it did not stop for the crossing. There was no fog.

Ticket Agent Lewis said he saw train No 11 when it was on the grade about 2 miles distant and that it consumed about four minutes in traveling this distance. During all of this time extra 22 was standing on the crossing.

This accident was caused by the failure of Engineman Porter, of Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific train No 11, to bring his train to a stop before passing over the intersection of the tracks of the two railroads, as required by rule 98 and also by special time-table instructions.

Rule 98 of the Book of Operating Rules of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad Co reads as follows:

Trains must approach the end of double track, junctions, railroad crossings at grade, and drawbridges prepared to stop unless the switches and signals are right and the track is clear. Where required by law trains must stop.

Special instructions in the current employees' time-table read in part as follows:

At the crossing of \* \* \* the Louisiana & North West Railroad at Gibbsland \* \* \* all trains must come to a full stop at a distance not exceeding two hundred (200) feet from the same and must not proceed until the way is known to be clear.

The statements made by Engineman Porter just after the accident occurred and the other statements made by him several days later are conflicting, but all of the other testimony indicates conclusively that

train No 11 was not brought to a stop at any point and also that the train did not approach the crossing prepared to stop. The results of the collision clearly show that this train was running at a comparatively high rate of speed when it reached the crossing. The preponderance of evidence also indicates that the weather was clear and that extra 22 had been standing on the crossing three or four minutes before it was struck, and in view of the fact that the air brakes were working properly and the headlight burning brightly, no explanation can be made as to why Engineman Porter failed to see extra 22 in sufficient time to bring his train to a stop before the collision occurred.

All of the employees who were questioned in the matter stated that it had been the practice to obey the special time-table instructions, quoted above, requiring trains to stop for the crossing. In this connection, however, attention is directed to the fact that since the occurrence of this accident an inspector of the Commission who was a passenger on one of the trains of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad noted that instead of bringing the train to a full stop before going over the crossing the engineman reduced the speed to about 7 or 8 miles an hour, sounded two short blasts of the whistle, released the brakes, began working steam, and passed over the crossing at a speed of 12 to 14 miles an hour, it was also noted that at this time the approach of trains from the north on the Louisiana & North West Railroad was obscured from the engineman's view by cars standing on an interchange track at that point. At Sibley, La., where the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad crosses at an unprotected grade crossing, a similar procedure was followed, the train slowed down to about 8 or 10 miles an hour and then the engineman sounded two short blasts of the whistle, released the brakes, began working steam, and pulled down to the station a few hundred feet beyond the crossing. It is possible that these cases of violation of the rules were exceptions to the general practice, but their occurrence so soon after the accident, taken in connection with the accident itself, points strongly to the conclusion that the provisions of the rules involved are frequently violated.

To prevent the recurrence of accidents of this character measures should at once be taken to insure the safe operation of trains over crossings of this character, by the installation of interlocking plants, signals and derails, gates, or other protective devices, and by the strict enforcement and observance of rules necessary for safe operation at such points.

Engineman Porter entered the service of the Vicksburg, Shreveport & Pacific Railroad Co. as engineman in October, 1918, his record was clear. He had had several years' experience as fireman and engineman with other railroads.

The records covering the hours of service of Fireman Roman of extra 22, of the Louisiana & North West Railroad, show that at the time of the accident he had been on duty approximately 36 hours, in violation of the Federal hours of service law. This was explained by G. A. Campbell, manager, as follows: The fireman was called for duty on February 16 at 1 p. m., two cars in the train were derailed, and finally the crew was returned to the terminal at 7 45 p. m., leaving Fireman Roman with the engine, which was towed into the terminal, arriving there at noon the following day. The engine was then gotten ready for the trip on which the accident here under investigation occurred, leaving the terminal at 1 45 p. m., less than two hours after the engine had been towed in. The same crew which had been returned at 7 45 p. m. on February 16 was called for the run, the fact that Fireman Roman did not reach the terminal with the balance of the crew being overlooked, while the fireman accepted the call and did not say anything about having remained with his engine while the derailment was being cleared up. All of the other members of the crew of extra 22 had been on duty 14 hours and 35 minutes after having been off duty 15 hours and 45 minutes. The train crew of train No. 11 had been on duty 7 hours and 30 minutes after having been off duty 22 hours and 20 minutes, while the engine crew of train No. 11 had been on duty 2 hours and 25 minutes prior to which Engineman Porter had been off duty 52 hours and Fireman Gunn 25 hours and 30 minutes.

Respectfully submitted

W. P. BORLAND,  
*Chief, Bureau of Safety*

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