

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
WILKES-BARRE & HAZLETON RAILWAY AT ST. JOHNS, PA.,
ON MAY 18, 1928.

June 21, 1928.

To the Commission:

On May 18, 1928, there was a head-end collision between two passenger trains on the Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton Railway at St. Johns, Pa., which resulted in the death of 1 employee, and the injury of 28 passengers and 3 employees.

Location and method of operation

The Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton Railway is an electric line extending between Wilkes-Barre and Hazle Park Junction, Pa., a distance of 28.56 miles; between Hazle Park Junction and Hazleton, a distance of 1.54 miles, trains of this railway are operated over the tracks of the Lehigh Traction Company. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block signal system being in use.

The accident occurred at a point 403 feet north of the north switch of what is known as Power House Siding, this siding being 1,273 feet in length, with its south switch located 1,110 feet north of the station at St. Johns. Approaching the point of accident from the south, beginning at St. Johns station, the track is tangent for a distance of 1,694 feet, followed by a 5° curve to the left 596 feet in length and then tangent track for a distance of 545 feet, the accident occurring on this latter tangent at a point 49 feet from its northern end. Approaching from the north there is a tangent 1,728 feet in length and then a 5° curve to the left 400 feet in length, followed by the tangent on which the accident occurred. The grade at the point of accident is 2.5 per cent ascending for northbound trains. On account of trees and embankments bordering the right of way neither train could be seen from the motorman's compartment of the opposing train until they were within about 600 feet of the point of accident.

Meeting points for schedules trains are designated on the time-table in heavy-faced type and trains are not permitted to go beyond such meeting point without a written train order from the dispatcher.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 2.08 p.m.

Description

Northbound passenger train No. 15, consisted of motor 232 of steel construction, and was in charge of Conductor Zearfoss and Motorman Cunius. This train left Hazleton, 9.65 miles south of St. Johns, at 1.45 p.m., on time, stopped at St. Johns, and then passed Power House Siding, the time-table meeting point with train No. 12, without stopping, and collided with that train while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 15 and 25 miles per hour.

Southbound passenger train No. 12 consisted of Motor 220 of steel construction, and was in charge of Conductor Pearson and Motorman Simmons. This train left Wilkes-Barre, 20.45 miles north of St. Johns, at 1:30 p.m., on time, and was approaching Power House Siding when it collided with train No. 15 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been from 8 to 10 miles per hour.

The impact telescoped the front vestibule of each car, while their forward ends were considerably damaged. The wreckage caught fire immediately after the accident and all inflammable material was consumed, resulting in the bodies of the cars being practically a total loss. The employee killed was the motorman of train No. 15.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Zearfoss, of train No. 15, stated that his train was scheduled to meet train No. 12 at Power House Siding. Several stops were made enroute, and at one point a package was delivered to the motorman. After leaving St. Johns, Conductor Zearfoss inquired of the motorman as to the destination of this package and the motorman replied that it was destined for Wilkes-Barre, this conversation occurred at about the time their train was passing the south switch of Power House Siding. He said the train continued and when it had reached a point a short distance beyond the north switch of the siding, at which time Conductor Zearfoss was in the

smoking compartment, he felt an application of the brakes and upon looking forward he observed train No. 12 approaching, it then being only 150 feet distant; he estimated the speed of his own train at the time of the accident to have been from 15 to 25 miles per hour. Conductor Zearfoss stated that he had entirely forgotten the meet with train No. 12 at Power House Siding and could give no reason for his oversight other than that the conversation with the motorman regarding the package apparently took his mind off the opposing train. The rules require that approaching meeting points conductors must signal motormen a meeting-point signal by means of the air whistle, but Conductor Zearfoss said he did not do so in this instance nor had it been his practice to do so in the past when approaching Power House Siding, for the reason that after his train departed from St. Johns he usually entered the motorman's compartment for the purpose of personally ascertaining whether or not the opposing train was then on the siding. Conductor Zearfoss further stated that immediately after the accident he assisted two injured passengers and then got off the train and observed the motorman of his train in the motorman's compartment but was afraid to go to his assistance as there was fire flying from some overhead wires in that compartment. Each car was equipped with two shoes which he noticed were still in contact with the third or power rail and he made an effort to break this contact by using implements provided for this purpose but did not complete the task as he thought he could save time by proceeding to the power house a short distance away and having the current shut off.

Motorman Simmons, of train No. 12, stated that upon reaching a point a short distance north of Power House Siding he exchanged meeting-point signals with the conductor. He then opened a side window in his compartment which was the usual practice, and immediately afterwards he noticed train No. 15 approaching, he at once reversed the power but the trains were then too close together to avert the accident. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the accident to have been about 10 miles per hour. As soon as possible after the occurrence of the accident he got off and hurried to the power house and notified the engineer at that point to shut off the current.

Conductor Pearson, of train No. 12, stated that he sounded the regular meeting-point whistle signal when approaching Power House Siding and then prepared to get off for the purpose of opening the switch as soon as

his train had arrived at that point. While so engaged the motorman reversed the power but the conductor did not know for what purpose until the accident occurred, he estimated the speed at about 8 miles per hour at the time of the accident. Conductor Pearson said his car contained equipment for use in breaking the contact at the third rail but that he made no attempt to do so after the accident as he was engaged in assisting passengers from the wreckage and then assisted in an attempt to remove the motorman of train No. 15, who was caught in his compartment.

Engineer Kuhns, on duty at St. Johns sub-station at the time of the accident, stated that shortly after 2 p.m. the gong in the station started ringing, indicating that the circuit was grounded. Shortly afterwards he looked out of the door and noticed Motorman Simmons approaching and he then shut off the current which was about five minutes after the gong first sounded. Securing fire extinguishers and accompanied by Foreman Warner of the third-rail department, who was at his station at the time, he proceeded to the scene of accident and attempted to extinguish the fire but without success. The statements of Engineer Kuhns were corroborated by those of Foreman Warner.

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Superintendent/Shops Brown stated that in his opinion the serious damage to the cars by fire was caused by a short circuit in the controller cable, which connects the third rail shoes with the overhead vestibule transference switches. There are also numerous light wires which evidently were grounded as a result of the accident and which contributed to a great extent in causing the intense heat that developed afterwards.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by train No. 15 over-running a time-table meeting point, for which Conductor Zearfoss and Motorman Cunius are responsible.

Conductor Zearfoss admitted that he had entirely overlooked the meet with train No. 12 and the only excuse he could offer for his oversight was the fact that he had been in conversation with Motorman Cunius at about the time their train passed the south switch of Power House Siding, which probably caused him to forget the opposing train. The reason for the failure of Motorman Cunius to bring his train to a stop before passing the north switch of Power House Siding is not known, as he was killed as a result of the accident.

The investigation developed that an attempt was made to break the contact between the shoes and the power rail in order to prevent the fire which ensued, but before this was accomplished it was decided that quicker action could be obtained by having the current turned off at the sub-station located near the scene of the accident, before this could be done, however, the fire had gotten beyond control.

The employees involved were experienced men, at the time of the accident Conductor Zearfoss and Motor-man Cunius had been on duty 7 hours and 8 minutes, prior to which they had been off duty 10 hours and 25 minutes and 13 hours and 55 minutes, respectively.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND

Director.