

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON
THE YAZOO & MISSISSIPPI VALLEY RAILROAD AT WEBB,
MISS., ON JULY 9, 1929

November 5, 1929

To the Commission:

On July 9, 1929, there was a head-end collision between two passenger trains on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad at Webb, Miss., which resulted in the death of 1 employee, and the injury of 53 passengers, 2 mail clerks, 1 Pullman porter and 9 employees.

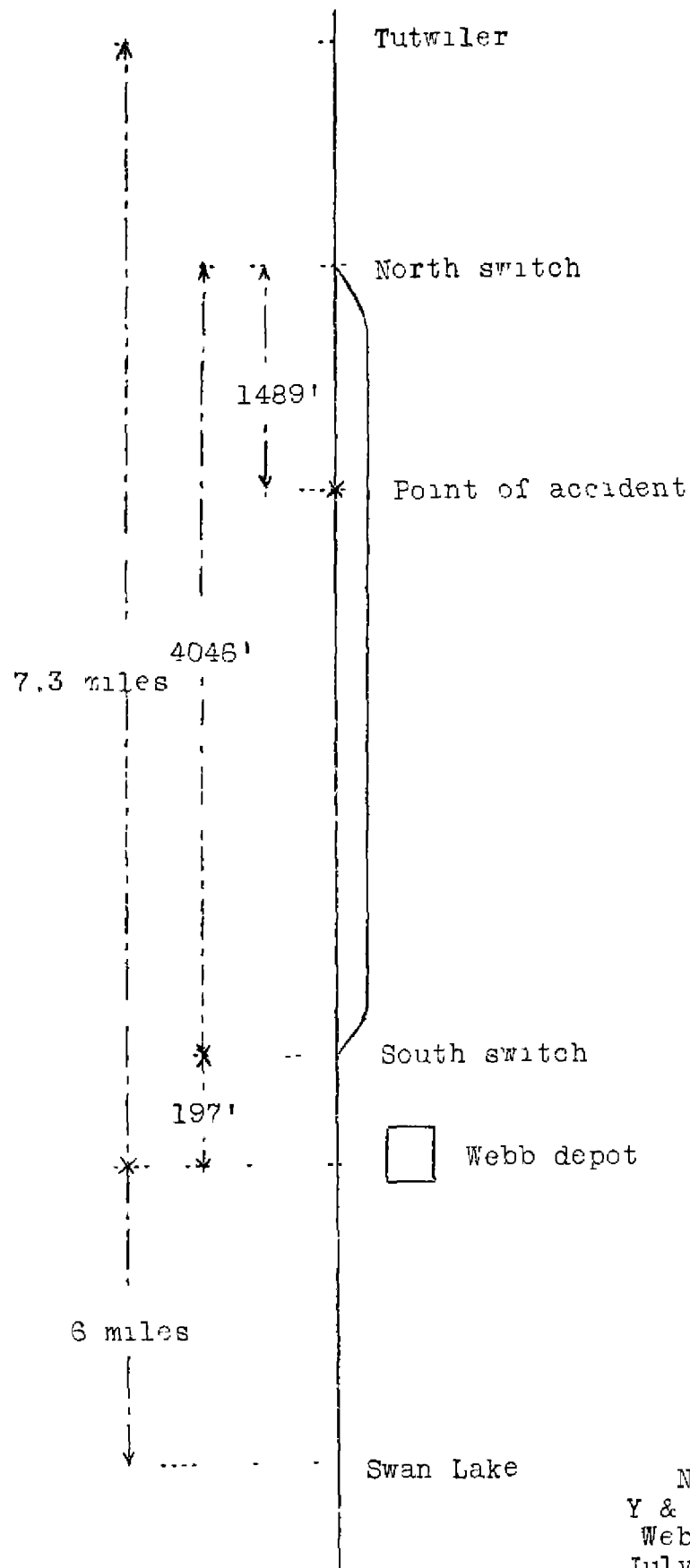
Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Tutwiler District of the Memphis Division, extending between Lambert and Swan Lake, Miss., a distance of 29.4 miles, 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-signals being in use. Northbound trains are superior to trains of the same class in the opposite direction. There is a passing track at Webb 4,046 feet in length which parallels the main track on the east, the south switch of which is located 197 feet north of the station. The accident occurred at a point 1,489 feet south of the north passing-track switch; approaching this point from the south the track is tangent for a distance of 5,000 feet, followed by a 2° curve to the left 1,175 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 125 feet from its southern end. Approaching from the north the track is tangent for a distance of 4,800 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is level at the point of accident. Owing to buildings and shrubbery, the view of the point of accident is restricted to approximately 400 feet.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 12.40 p.m.

Description

Northbound passenger train No. 324 consisted of one combination mail and baggage car, two coaches and one Pullman sleeping car, hauled by engine 1009, and was in charge of Conductor Smith and Engineman Dorra. The first car was of steel construction, the next two were of wood, and the last car had a steel under frame. At Swan Lake, 6 miles south of Webb, the crew received a copy of train order No. 42, Form 19, reading as follows:



No. 1537
Y & M V R.R.
Webb, Miss.
July 9, 1929.

"No. 324 Eng 1009 meet No. 323 Eng 1011
at Webb"

Webb is also the time-table meeting point of these two trains. Train No. 324 departed from Swan Lake at 12.24 p.m., on time, left the station at Webb at 12.37 p.m., proceeded on the main track toward the north switch, and collided with train No. 323 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 20 and 30 miles per hour.

Southbound passenger train No. 323 consisted of one combination mail and baggage car and two coaches, hauled by engine 1011, and was in charge of Conductor Reeves and Engineman Todd. The first car was of steel construction, while the other two were of wood. At Tutwiler, 7.3 miles north of Webb and the last open office, the crew received a copy of train order No. 42, Form 19, reading as follows:

"No 324 Eng 1009 meet No 323 Eng 1011
at Webb No 324 take siding at Webb
Nos 32 and 324 had no signals through"

Train No. 323 left Tutwiler at 12.25 p.m., on time, passed the north switch at Webb, and was approaching the station when it collided with train No. 324 while traveling at a speed estimated at from 20 to 30 miles per hour.

The front ends of both engines were badly damaged, while their cars were telescoped by the cisterns, which rested against the boiler heads. The second car in train No. 324 was considerably damaged and the forward end of the third car was telescoped for a distance of about 15 feet. All of the cars in train No. 323 were slightly damaged. The employee killed was the flagman of train No. 324, who was riding in the vestibule at the head end of the third car.

Summary of evidence

Engineman Dorral, of train No. 324, stated that upon the arrival of his train at Swan Lake he received two train orders, one of which was a slow order and the other a positive meet with train No. 323 at Webb, which latter order did not direct his train to take the siding at that point. When his train departed from Webb it continued on the main track and when it reached a point about one-half mile beyond the station, running at a speed of between 25 and 30 miles per hour, he observed a train approaching on the main track about 50 or 60 feet distant; he immediately applied the brakes in emergency and did not remember anything more until after

the accident. The last time he saw his fireman prior to the accident the latter was engaged in putting in a fire and the engineman said that from his own position on the outside of the curve his view of the track ahead was much restricted.

Fireman Callahan, of train No. 324, stated that he read the order received at Swan Lake, to meet train No. 323 at Webb, and as it contained no information for his train to take the siding it gave them the right to the main track at the meeting point. Due to having difficulty in keeping up the steam pressure, he started putting in a fire as soon as the engine passed over a highway crossing a short distance north of the station at Webb, and when he again looked ahead he saw the opposing train only a short distance away; he did not have time to jump before the collision occurred. He thought the speed of his train was about 25 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Conductor Smith, of train No. 324, stated that the operator at Swan Lake handed him a slow order as well as a running order but made no remark concerning their contents. He read the meet order to the operator and then informed the train porter as to what it contained, after which he handed it to the flagman to read. While his train was standing at the station at Webb he went forward and when the agent entered the baggage car he remarked to him that the board was clear and inquired if there was a middle order to be delivered, to which the operator replied in the negative. As soon as the scheduled departing time of his train had arrived, the train proceeded and when it reached the south end of the curve beyond the station the brakes were applied in emergency, which was the last thing he remembered until some time after the accident. He estimated the speed of his train at the time the brakes were applied at 25 miles per hour.

Engineman Todd, of train No. 323, stated that he received the order at Tutwiler fixing the meet with train No. 324 at Webb and directing that train to take the siding. While approaching Webb he eased off on the throttle in order to give train No. 324 sufficient time to enter the passing track and close the south switch. Just before his train entered the curve north of the station he observed smoke in the vicinity of the station, but at that time his view of the station was obscured by trees. As his train was rounding the curve he noticed the engine of train No. 323 pass a whistle post about one-fourth mile north of the station, at which time the two trains were approximately 150 or 175 yards apart. This was his first intimation that the opposing train was on the main track and he immediately applied the brakes in emergency, sounded the

whistle, and shouted to the fireman to jump, doing so himself just before the occurrence of the accident. He estimated the speed of his train at about 35 or 40 miles per hour when the brakes were applied, and thought it had been reduced to about 20 miles per hour at the time of the accident.

Conductor Reeves, of train No. 323, stated that he expected his own train to proceed on the main track to the south switch at Webb, where the opposing train would get into clear, and his first indication of anything wrong was when the brakes were applied in emergency and the engine whistle sounded, the collision occurring a few seconds later. On account of the short interval between the time the brakes were applied and the occurrence of the accident, he did not think the speed had been reduced to any extent, and he estimated it to have been about 30 miles per hour.

There was nothing of additional importance brought out by the statements of Flagman Leath and Train Porter Fleming, of train No. 323, as they were also unaware of anything unusual until the brakes were applied just prior to the accident.

Dispatcher McAlister, on duty at the time of the accident, stated that train order No. 42 was transmitted by telephone simultaneously to the operators at Swan Lake and Tutwiler, directing the two trains involved to meet at Webb and train No. 324 to take the siding, and at the time it was being sent he copied it in his train-order book. As soon as it had been transmitted he instructed the operator at Tutwiler to "add check" and the operator at Swan Lake to repeat. Both operators repeated the order and he underscored it in the train-order book as it was being repeated by each operator. He explained that his reason for instructing the operator at Tutwiler to add a register check was for the purpose of permitting the operator at Swan Lake to repeat the order immediately, and then he would authorize the operator at Tutwiler to add to the latter's copy of the order a check on signals carried by trains Nos. 32 and 324, so that train No. 323 would not be delayed in stopping to check train registers at some stations south of that point; this check was a regular occurrence. Instead of waiting, however, the operator at Tutwiler apparently went ahead and added the check on his own initiative while the operator at Swan Lake was repeating the order. The operator at Swan Lake was the first to repeat the order, doing so correctly, and Dispatcher McAlister then gave him complete, at 12.19 p.m. The order then was repeated correctly by the operator at Tutwiler, who added to it the register check on trains Nos. 32 and 324, and the order was made complete to

Tutwiler at 12.30 p.m. When the operator at Webb informed Dispatcher McAlister that the accident had occurred on the main track he called the operators at Swan Lake and Tutwiler and inquired if their copies of train order No. 42 showed that train No. 324 was required to take the siding and was informed by the operator at Swan Lake that he had no such record while the operator at Tutwiler advised that his copy contained this information. He did not ask them to repeat the order at this time as he was positive that they had repeated it correctly at the time it was put out, else his train-order book would not have shown this information. Dispatcher McAlister further stated that it is the usual practice to put out meet orders for all first-class trains at scheduled meeting points, the object being to insure that the inferior train reaches the meeting point, as well as providing an added safety precaution. As to the requirements of the rules that middle orders be put out when practicable, the dispatcher said he did not do so in this instance as the operator had gone to lunch at 11.30 a.m. and is allowed one hour for this purpose, he knew of no reason why the operator could not be released at some other time except that this period is the most convenient, and said that he probably would have had time to put out the middle order after the operator returned from lunch but had been instructed not to send an order the second time for the purpose of making it a middle order.

Operator Bennett, on duty at Swan Lake, stated that he called the dispatcher and asked him to fix No. 324 and after the dispatcher called the operator at Tutwiler he transmitted train order No. 42. As soon as the dispatcher had finished that part of the order which fixed the meeting point at Webb, the dispatcher instructed Operator Bennett to repeat and the operator at Tutwiler to add check. Operator Bennett did not hear the dispatcher say anything about train No. 324 taking the siding, neither did he hear the dispatcher tell the operator at Tutwiler what to add to the order, for as soon as he finished repeating it, which was exactly as it had been written by him, the dispatcher gave him "complete" and the time, which he understood was 12.18 p.m., and authorized the issuance of a clearance card, and he did not listen to any further conversation. Operator Bennett was aware that the rules required him to listen when other operators repeat train orders but did not do so in this case as train No. 324 was then approaching his station and he wanted to be in position to hand up the engineman's copy of the orders when the engine passed the station so that he would not have to walk to the engine, which he said usually stopped about two car-lengths north of the station door. He admitted that there probably would have been time for him to

listen while the operator at Tutwiler repeated the order, and at the same time handle the mail and baggage, without delaying the train. Operator Bennett further stated that he did not write the order in advance, was not behind the dispatcher in copying it, and did not recopy it afterwards, and having added the information that train No. 324 was to take siding unless the dispatcher furnished this information after Operator Bennett had completed his order and left the office, as he was positive that he had written and repeated it just as it had been given to him.

Operator Schilling, third-trick operator at Swan Lake, stated that he was standing within 2 or 3 feet of Operator Bennett at the time the latter copied train order No. 42 and paid close attention to the order, and all he heard the operator repeat was the order requiring train No. 324 to meet No. 323 at Webb; he heard no mention made that train No. 324 was to take siding. Operator Schilling also said that Bennett then requested a clearance and filled out a clearance card, folded it with the orders, and delivered them to the train crew without waiting until Tutwiler repeated the order. Operator Schilling was certain that the order was repeated the same as it appeared on the office copy.

Operator Stanfield, on duty at Tutwiler, stated that train order No. 42 was transmitted simultaneously to the operator at Swan Lake and himself, down to and including the words: "324 take siding at Webb." At that point the dispatcher requested the operator at Swan Lake to repeat and for him to add. He did not listen to the operator at Swan Lake repeat the order in its entirety but only that portion of it fixing the meeting point, as he was engaged in completing his own copy of the order by adding the register check on trains No. 32 and 324. The dispatcher had not instructed him to add this check, but he said it was the usual form and a daily occurrence except when those trains carried signals, and he thought it was the dispatcher's intention; he also went ahead with the check because of the fact that he was in a hurry to complete the order so that he could repeat it as soon as Swan Lake finished and thus avoid delaying train No. 323 and also enable himself to sell tickets. Operator Stanfield did not remove the telephone receiver from his head while the operator at Swan Lake was repeating the order, but was so engrossed in adding the check that he failed to hear Operator Bennett repeat that train No. 324 was to take siding; he later realized that this was the most important part of the order.

Agent-Operator Walker, on duty at Webb, stated that the operators' schedule calls for one hour for lunch

between the hours of 11.30 a.m. and 2.00 p.m. On the day of the accident he received permission from the dispatcher to go at about 11.40 a.m., and returned to his station at about 12.10 p.m. He was not called by the dispatcher to put out a middle order for trains Nos. 323 and 324, and said that the order is not put out every day and that sometimes two or three days elapse without his receiving it. He considers himself available for duty as soon as he returns, even though his lunch hour has not expired; in fact, he had been called by the dispatcher to copy middle orders on several occasions after he had returned and before he had been off duty an hour.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by failure to include in a meet order as issued to the superior train a provision requiring that train to take siding.

There is considerable conflict in the testimony as to how much of the meet order was transmitted before the dispatcher requested the operator at Swan Lake to repeat and the operator at Tutwiler to add a register check. The operator at Swan Lake steadfastly maintained that he was told to repeat the order as soon as that part of the order naming the meeting point had been sent and he said he immediately repeated it just as it had been written, and received "complete" from the dispatcher at that time. His statements in this respect were upheld by Operator Schilling, who was off duty but was in the telegraph office at Swan Lake at the time the order was received. On the other hand, Dispatcher McAlister was equally certain that he did not ask the operator at Swan Lake to repeat until that part of the order directing train No. 324 to take siding had been sent, and he was also certain that Operator Bennett repeated this part of the order, as indicated by his train-order book. The operator at Tutwiler corroborated the statements of the dispatcher, but the train-order book was not conclusive, for the reason that the portion of the order requiring train No. 324 to take siding was underscored three times while all other parts of the order were underscored twice; the reason for this variation could not be ascertained. In support of the dispatcher, however, it may be stated that it does not sound reasonable for Operator Bennett to suggest that the dispatcher added the words about train No. 324 taking siding, after the order had been made complete to Bennett.

While the responsibility for the original error can not be definitely placed on any one person, the

responsibility for failing to obey rules which would have detected the error can be very definitely placed. The rules provide that each operator receiving a train order should observe whether the others repeat it correctly. Both operators disobeyed this rule, being in too much of a hurry to attend to other duties, although they admitted that they had several minutes in which to have listened while the other repeated the order, and still perform their other duties without delaying their respective trains. There is a further provision in the rules which requires that train orders, when practicable, must include the operator at the meeting, or waiting point. This provision of the rules was not observed by the dispatcher, although investigation did not develop anything to indicate the impracticability of including the operator at the meeting point, which would have given additional opportunity for the prevention of the accident.

The dangers attending the operation of trains under the time-table and train-order system are well known, and it is for the purpose of guarding against these dangers that employees are required to compare and check with one another at every opportunity. The train order involved in this accident was not properly handled by the dispatcher, nor by either of the two operators concerned. Had the dispatcher sent a middle order the accident might still have occurred, but at least there would have been one more opportunity for detecting the error which had been made. As for the two operators, there can be no excuse for their failure to listen and make sure that the order was understood and copied alike by each.

In train No. 323 there was a steel car followed by two wooden cars; these wooden cars were only slightly damaged. In train No. 324 there was a steel car followed by two wooden cars and then a steel-underframe sleeping car, the head end of the third car was telescoped by the rear end of the second car, and both of these cars were badly damaged, while no damage was sustained by the sleeping car. The flagman, who was fatally injured, was riding in the vestibule at the head end of the telescoped car. The danger of operating cars of wooden construction between cars of steel or steel-underframe construction is well recognized and has been mentioned in previous reports covering the investigation of accidents, and it is believed that steps should be taken by all the carriers to eliminate the practice of operating wooden cars in this manner at the earliest practicable date.

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.