

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

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REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD NEAR VULCAN, ALA.,
ON NOVEMBER 15, 1923.

January 14, 1924.

To the Commission.

On November 15, 1923, there was a rear-end collision between two freight trains on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad near Vulcan, Ala., resulting in the death of one employee and the injury of three employees.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on the Cain Creek Branch of the Birmingham Mineral Division, extending between Powhatan and Middle Yard (Boyles), Ala., a distance of 35.33 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-signal system being in use. The accident occurred in a rock cut, about one-half mile south of Vulcan approaching this point from the north there is a curve of 9° to the right 1,241 feet in length, then 180 feet of tangent, followed by a curve of 5° to the left 1,470 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point about 500 feet from its southern end. The grade is ascending for southbound trains, varying from 0.694 to 0.943 per cent, being at its maximum at the point of accident. At Vulcan there is a spur, to the east of the main track, 1.37 miles in length, which leads to Sayre Mines. The view of the point of accident is considerably restricted. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 7.55 p.m.

Description.

Southbound freight train extra 1246 consisted of 12 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1246, and was in charge of Conductor Truss and Engineman Luster. This train reached the branch from the Sayre Mines spur and after having proceeded about one-half mile south of the spur-track switch, while traveling at a speed of about 4 or 5 miles an hour, its rear end was struck by extra 1199.

Southbound freight train extra 1199 consisted of 10 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 1199, and was in charge of Conductor Leonard and Engineman Pressley. This train left Colta, 8.66 miles north of Vulcan, at 7.15 p.m., and shortly after passing Vulcan, while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 12 and 16 miles an hour, it collided with the rear end of extra 1246.

The caboose of extra 1246 was demolished, while the first two cars ahead of it were damaged. Engine 1199 was derailed and badly damaged, but remained upright. The employee killed was a brakeman of extra 1199.

Summary of Evidence.

Vulcan is not considered a spur, and trains leaving the spur protect by flag. On arrival of extra 1246 at Vulcan, from Sayre mines, tonnage in excess of the engine's rating was being hauled, therefore, as was customary, the major portion of the train was left standing on the spur at this point, and Flagman Wright remained with this portion, the first three or four cars of which were blocking the main line, to afford protection while the engine took the excess tonnage, consisting of four cars to Chetopa, 1.86 miles south, and returned. Conductor Truss remained at Chetopa to communicate with the dispatcher, and also to protect against a northbound train, while the engine returned light to Vulcan. After coupling to the remaining portion of the train, Flagman Wright was called in, and the train departed. While rounding the curve at a low rate of speed, Flagman Wright heard extra 1199 approaching, decided he did not have time to accomplish any good with a fusee, and immediately got off with a lighted red lantern, after which he saw the headlight of extra 1199. He estimated the speed of extra 1199 to have been about 20 miles an hour when the engine passed him, and said his flagging signals were acknowledged, the accident occurring shortly afterwards. Flagman Wright stated that extra 1199 was about 20 car lengths away when he first saw it, while the caboose of his train was about 7 car lengths from him at this time, and when the collision occurred he was about 2 car lengths south of the caboose of extra 1199. He admitted that he did not afford proper protection at Vulcan, while the engine went to Chetopa and returned, going back only about 8 or 10 car lengths with only a red lantern. When called in he was only back about 4 or 5 car lengths, and admitted that on returning to his train he neither placed torpedoes on the rail, nor left burning fusees, and he was of the impression the accident occurred about 10 minutes after leaving Vulcan. Engineman Luster stated that the sanders were not working properly and that the train was traveling at a low rate of speed on the ascend-

ing grade, owing to the driving wheels slipping, he was unaware of anything wrong until he heard the following train sound the whistle just before he felt the impact of the collision.

Engineman Pressley, of extra 1199, said he had verbal instructions to look out for extra 1246 at Vulcan, but on encountering no torpedoes or fuses at that point began working the engine hard in order to get up the ascending grade, and stated the first intimation he had of anything wrong was on seeing the lantern of the flagman of extra 1246 in the cut, and just as he sounded the whistle, the brakeman riding on the fireman's side shouted to him and he immediately shut off steam and applied the air brakes in emergency, reducing the speed from 18 or 20 miles an hour to 10 or 12 miles an hour at the time of the accident. Engineman Pressley stated that the flagman of extra 1246 was only about four car lengths from the caoose of his train when he first saw him, also that the air brakes on his train were tested and worked properly en route, and that the headlight was burning brightly, but owing to the curve in the cut his vision was restricted to about four car lengths. Other members of the crew were unaware of anything wrong until the whistle was sounded just before the accident occurred.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by the failure of Flagman Wright, of extra 1246, properly to protect his train.

The flagging rule of this railroad requires that a flagman go back a certain specified distance, place one torpedo on the rails, go back an additional distance, place two torpedoes, and then return to the location of the first torpedo, when recalled, he picks up the single torpedo out at night, before returning, is required to leave a lighted fusee. After being called in at Vulcan, Flagman Wright returned to his train without placing torpedoes on the rail or leaving a lighted fusee, he admitted that he did not afford proper protection at this point. He was fully aware that his train was moving under circumstances in which it was liable to be overtaken by another train, yet took no action whatever to afford protection until it was too late. Had he thrown off lighted fusees at proper intervals, this accident undoubtedly would have been prevented.

This accident is one of those which might have been prevented had an adequate system of automatic train control been in use.

All of the employees involved were experienced men. At the time of the accident the crew of extra 1246 had been on duty 7 hours and 5 minutes, while the crew of extra 1199 had been on duty 1 hour and 25 minutes, previous to which both crews had been off duty approximately 17 hours.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BCRLAND,

Director.