

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION.

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REPORT OF THE CHIEF OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE LOUISVILLE & NASHVILLE RAILROAD AT HILBERTA, ALA., ON JUNE 15, 1922.

July 1, 1922.

To the Commission:

On June 15, 1922, there was a derailment of a passenger train on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad at Hilberta, Ala., resulting in the death of 2 employees of the South Alabama Produce Company, and the injury of 53 passengers, 2 employees, 3 mail clerks, 1 Pullman conductor, and 1 train news agent, also 3 employees of the produce company.

Location and method of operation.

This accident occurred on that part of the Mobile & Montgomery Division extending between Mobile and Flomaton, Ala., a distance of 59.54 miles, which in the vicinity of the point of accident 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 the south switch of the siding at Hilberta, approaching this point from the south there are more than 8 miles of tangent. The grade is 0.62 per cent ascending for a distance of 2,500 feet, then level to the point of accident, a distance of approximately 200 feet. The track in this vicinity is laid with 90-pound rails, 33 feet in length, with an average of 18 red cypress ties to the rail-length, single-spiked, tie-plated, and ballasted with slag about 24 inches in depth, the track is well maintained. The switch at the point of accident is a facing-point switch for northbound trains, and leads off the main track to the east to a siding, which is 523 feet in length. The switch stand, which is the high rotary type, is 7 feet 5 inches in height, located on the engineman's side of a northbound train; the red target had pointed ends and the green target had rounded ends. About midway the north and south switches, is located the South Alabama Produce Company's warehouse, from which cars on the siding are loaded with produce for shipment. At the time of the accident, there were 2 box cars on the siding, as well as a section crew's motor car and push car. The view approaching the point of accident from the south is unobstructed. The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 2:15 p.m.

Description.

Northbound passenger train first No 4 consisted of 1 mail car, 1 baggage and express car, 3 coaches, 1 dining car, and 4 Pullman sleeping cars, all of all-steel construction, hauled by engine 202, and was in charge of Conductor Cargill and Engineman Mullen. This train passed Canoe, about 1-3/4 miles from Hilberta, at 2:12 p m , 4 minutes late, and was derailed at the south switch of the siding at Hilberta while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 45 and 55 miles an hour.

Engine 202 came to rest on its left side, east of the siding, and about a car length north of the warehouse; the tender remained upright. The first five cars, and the forward truck of the sixth car were derailed, but remained practically upright. The warehouse was badly damaged, the track completely torn up for a distance of about 300 feet, and the motor car and one of the box cars were demolished.

Summary of evidence.

About one-half hour before the accident occurred, Section Foreman Corley had Section Laborer Armstrong open the south switch at Hilberta, and the motor car and loaded push car were backed in on the siding, stopping a short distance south of the two box cars, which were opposite the warehouse; then Section Foreman Corley got off the motor car, instructed the section crew to secure shovels from the push car, and work just south of the switch. There were eight section laborers in this crew, and although it was necessary for them to pass this switch on their way to where the work was to be done, not one of them noticed the position of the switch points, or the indication of the switch target, either at the time they passed, or while the work was in progress. According to the rules, Section Foreman Corley should have ascertained that the switch was properly closed after the motor car and push car entered the siding, however, he admitted that he did not do this, although he went back to examine the frog; it was at this point at which his switch key was returned by Section Laborer Armstrong, who apparently had forgotten to close the switch. Section Foreman Corley then made an examination of a derail, located on the siding just north of the warehouse, also of the north switch, and was standing opposite the warehouse, between the main track and siding, at the time of the accident. Section Laborer Armstrong disappeared immediately after the occurrence of the accident.

On account of the dust, made as a result of the work being done by the section crew, Engineman Mullen said he was unable to see what indication the target displayed, until within 150 feet of the switch, he then shut off steam and applied the

air brakes in emergency; he further stated that at the time of the accident, Fireman Carter was putting in a fire. He estimated the speed of the train to have been between 50 and 55 miles an hour.

Conclusions.

This accident was caused by an open switch, for which Section Foreman Corley and Section Laborer Armstrong are responsible.

Section Laborer Armstrong opened the switch, and after the section motor and push cars had entered the siding, returned the switch key to the foreman without first having closed and locked the switch. After the section cars entered the siding, Section Foreman Corley went back to examine the frog of the switch, at which point the section laborer returned the switch key to him, but at no time did he notice that the switch had been left open.

All of the employees involved were experienced men; 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. Zerkland

Chief, Bureau of Safety.