

Oct 17/19

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
STONY CREEK RAILROAD NEAR BELFRY, PA.,
ON SEPTEMBER 21, 1919.

October 20, 1919.

On September 21, 1919, there was a head-end collision between a freight train and a passenger and milk train on the Stony Creek Railroad near Belfry, Pa., which resulted in the death of 1 employee and injury of 8 passengers and 1 employee. After investigation of this accident, the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

The Stony Creek Railroad is a subsidiary road of the Philadelphia & Reading system. This road extends from Lansdale, Pa., to Norristown, Pa., a distance of 11 miles, and 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 midway between Belfry and Acorn, Pa. Approaching the point of accident from the south, the track is straight for a distance of more than a mile and approaching from the north there is a 2-degree curve to the right followed by a tangent 460 feet in length to the point of collision. In clear weather an unobstructed view of the track at this point may be had by engineers running in either direction for a distance of more than 2,000 feet. The grade at the point of accident is 1.3 per cent ascending for northbound trains. The weather was very foggy.

On the morning of the accident northbound freight train extra 946, consisting of 13 cars and a caboose, hauled by locomotive 946, left Norristown at 5.40 a.m., in charge of Conductor Long and Engineman Andrews. This train passed Belfry at about 7.06 a.m., the engineman and conductor being under the impression

that the time-table schedule which provided for an opposing passenger train passing Belfry at 7.10 a.m., was not effective on Sunday mornings, and at about 7.09 a.m., while extra 946 was running at a speed estimated at about 5 miles an hour, it collided with south-bound passenger train No. 112, about 1 mile north of Belfry.

Southbound passenger and milk train No. 112 consisted of locomotive 250, 1 combination car and 1 coach and was in charge of Conductor Guard and Engineman Meek. This train left Lansdale at 6.57 a.m., passed West Point, the last telegraph office north of the point of accident, at 7.04 or 7.05 a.m., and was running at a speed estimated at about 25 miles an hour when it collided with extra 946.

As a result of the collision one pair of engine truck wheels of locomotive 250 were derailed. The force of the collision demolished the tank of locomotive 946 and derailed one pair of driving wheels of that locomotive. Fireman Petshold of extra 946 was killed instantly.

Engineman Andrews of extra 946 stated that on the evening prior to the accident he was asked by Engineman Fessner to substitute for him on the Stony Creek Railroad that evening and the next morning and he agreed to do so favor Engineman Fessner, taking the matter up with the yardmaster and securing permission. He stated that on the trip on which the accident had occurred he left Norristown at 5.30 a.m., and upon getting out on to the road he found the weather very foggy and misty and he had considerable difficulty with the engine slipping. At asylum Cut he had run out of sand and the head brakeman secured a bucket of sand and the conductor and head brakeman got down on the front footboard

of the locomotive and sprinkled sand on the rails. Upon approaching Belfrey the conductor asked him about the opposing train that was due there at 7.10 a.m., and he told the conductor that there was no southbound train due there on Sunday mornings, his impression being that on Sundays train No. 112 used the Bethlehem Branch from Lansdale to Horristown and returned by way of the Stony Creek Railroad. Engineman Andrews stated that the conductor then looked at his time-table and was convinced that no opposing southbound train was due at Belfry. He admitted that he did not look at his own time table but felt sure in his own mind that he was right. On account of the heavy fog he did not see train No. 112 until it was too late to avoid the collision, although he made every possible effort to stop his train. Engineman Andrews further stated that he was promoted to engineman in March, 1919, but had never made a run as engineman prior to his going on duty the night before the accident. He also stated that prior to September 20th his last trip over the Stony Creek Railroad was made about a year before, but that he was familiar with the physical characteristics of the road.

Conductor Long, of extra 946, stated that before leaving Horristown on the morning of the accident he looked at his time-card and discovered that train No. 112 was due to leave Lansdale at 6.56 a.m. and would be due at Belfry at about 7.10 a.m. On approaching Belfry he told the engineman that train No. 112 was due but both the engineman and fireman told him that the train did not run on Sundays. He said he again looked at his time table but that he was down on the footboard of the locomotive spreading sand and did not look at it as carefully as he should.

and allowed the engineman to convince him that he had made a mistake about train No. 112 being due. Just before train No. 112 came into sight the head brakeman, who was also on the front foot-board of the locomotive spreading sand, asked him what time the passenger train was due at Belfry and on account of the noise made by the locomotive, he handed the time table to the head brakeman. The head brakeman then asked him what time his watch showed and before he could look, train No. 112 appeared in sight, being only about 3 car lengths away when he first saw it. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the collision at 6 or 8 miles an hour and stated that the headlights of neither of the locomotives were burning. Conductor Long further stated that he was an emergency conductor and had not made a trip over the Stony Creek Railroad for several weeks prior to the day of the accident. He also stated that he was under the impression that Engineman Andrews was an experienced engineman, or otherwise he would have acted more cautiously in making this run.

Head Brakeman Slater of extra 946 stated that on account of the damp condition of the rails on the morning of the accident, the locomotive slipped badly and on reaching Hartmanft could not go further because the supply of sand was exhausted. There was a pile of sand near the track at this point and he secured a bucketful and with the conductor rode on the front foot-board of the locomotive spreading sand on the rails. He stated that 23 minutes before the train reached Belfry he told the conductor that train No. 112 was due at that point at about 7.00 a.m., to which the conductor replied that train No. 112 ran the other way and was following them. The head brakeman

stated that he disputed the conductor and told him that he had better look at his time-card. The conductor did so and told him that he was right and that the train left Lansdale at 6.56 a.m., and would be due to pass Belfry at 7.06 a.m. He thought the train would stop at Belfry and gave no further thought to the opposing train. On account of being busy spreading sand on the rails he did not notice when the train passed Belfry and on looking up saw a locomotive coming through the fog being only 5 or 6 car lengths away. He stated that he then either jumped or fell to the side of the track. He further stated that his train was just moving when the collision occurred.

Brakeman Godshalk of extra 946 stated that at the time of the accident he was riding on the rear end of the train. He was not acquainted with the Sunday schedule of the Stony Creek Railroad and the conductor at no time had said anything to him about train No. 112. He stated that the train was not moving over 5 or 6 miles an hour when the collision occurred.

Flagman Aylward, of extra 946, stated that prior to the accident he looked at his time-card and discovered that they would have to meet train No. 112 at some point between Norr town and Lansdale. He thought possibly the conductor held a meet order for this train at West Point, but had not seen the conductor's orders. He stated further that the fog prevented one seeing a distance of more than 150 feet.

Engineman Meek of train No. 112 stated that on the morning of the accident his train left Lansdale about 10 minutes late and passed West Point between 1 and 2 minutes late. He did not stop at Acorn or look at his watch at that point, but

sounded the whistle for the road crossing south of Acorn. On reaching the curve north of the point of accident he shut off steam and was drifting around the curve when he saw a black object ahead of him through the fog, about 150 or 200 feet away. The speed of his train at this time was about 25 miles an hour and he immediately applied the brakes in emergency, but struck extra 946 before he was able to bring his train to a stop. Engineman Jack further stated that the headlights of neither of the locomotives were burning at the time of the accident.

The statements of Fireman Oberholtzer of train No. 112 agree with those of his engineman.

Conductor Ward of train No. 112 stated that the first intimation he had of the impending accident was an emergency application of the brakes which was followed almost immediately by the crash of the collision. He estimated the speed at the time at 25 or 30 miles an hour.

Trainman Wang and Baggage-master Atkinson of train No. 112, both stated that they did not notice any application of the brakes previous to the collision.

This accident was caused by the failure of Conductor Long and Engineman Andrews of extra 946 to acquaint themselves with the tim-table schedule, which resulted in their train occupying the main track on the time of an opposing superior train.

Inasmuch as a dispute arose as to whether or not they would encounter an opposing train, the failure of the crew in charge of extra 946 to make sure of the schedule of the passenger train is especially inexcusable. The statements of the engineman, conductor and head brakeman are somewhat conflicting as to just

what conversation took place relative to train No. 112 prior to the accident, but both the engineman and conductor agree that at first Conductor Long was under the impression that train No. 112 was due to pass Belfry at 7.10 a.m., and afterwards allowed the engineman to convince him that the train had gone from Lansdale to Herristown on another branch and would follow the extra back to Lansdale over the Stony Creek Railroad. The time-table for the Stony Creek Railroad is especially simple, there being only 4 train schedules shown, one train in each direction daily excepting Sundays and one train in each direction Sundays only. It seems almost incredible that Conductor Long should have misread the time-table if he looked at it at all. The engineman who was making his first trip as an engineman admitted that he did not even refer to his time-table when he and the conductor disagreed on whether or not they would meet an opposing train.

Conductor Long entered the service of the Philadelphia & Reading Railway as brakeman in August, 1915, was promoted to flagman in May, 1916, and to conductor in January, 1917. His record was good. He was a spare man and had not been over the Stony Creek Railroad for several weeks. Engineman Andrews entered the service as fireman in July, 1911, and was promoted to engineman in March, 1919. His discipline record was good but prior to going on duty on September 20, 1919, he had never operated a train as engineman.

At the time of the accident the crew of extra 946 had been on duty 8 hours and 20 minutes and the crew of train No. 112 about 1 hour. Prior to going on duty all of the employees involved had had off-duty periods sufficiently long to comply with the Hours of Service Law.