

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
DETROIT UNITED LINES AT WYANDOTTE, MICH., ON
DECEMBER 3, 1924

January 12, 1925.

To the Commission.

On December 3, 1924, a passenger train on the Detroit United Lines struck an automobile trailer truck at Wyandotte, Mich., resulting in the death of 4 passengers and 1 employee, and the injury of 10 passengers.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Detroit, Monroe and Toledo Division, which extends between Detroit, Mich., and Toledo, Ohio, a distance of 58.6 miles, in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a double-track electric road over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at North Line Road, which crosses the tracks at right angles at a point about 3,500 feet north of Wyandotte station. The track is tangent and level for a considerable distance in either direction from North Line Road. There is a speed restriction of 15 miles an hour in effect when crossing Oak Street, which, however, is about 3,600 feet beyond where the accident occurred.

Approaching the railroad from the west on North Line Road, the road is tangent for several miles and approximately level, with the exception of a slight rise approaching the crossing. After reaching a point 2,500 feet from the crossing the driver of an automobile can see a southbound train practically all the time from the time it reaches a point 3,500 feet from the crossing. North Line Road normally is but little traveled, but on account of having been recently improved it was being used as a detour around that part of the regular thoroughfare for travel between Detroit and Toledo, which was being repaired at the time. The crossing at the point of accident is unprotected except by a regular railroad crossing warning sign, which is located near the north side of the highway and about 20 feet west of the west side of the railroad.

It was dark and the weather was clear at the time of the accident which occurred at about 6.10 p.m.

Description

Southbound passenger train No. 226 consisted of motor cars 8002 and 181, coupled, the first car being of steel-underframe construction and the second of all-steel construction. Conductor Byers and Motorman Callahan were in charge of the first car, with Conductor Smith and Motorman Rollins in charge of the second car, Motorman Rollins, however, taking no part in the operation of the train. Train No. 226 left Detroit at 5.20 p.m., on time, passed Rouge, the last open office and approximately 6 miles north of the point of accident, at 6 p.m., six minutes late, and at about 6.10 p.m. struck an automobile trailer truck at North Line Road while traveling at a speed of about 40 or 45 miles an hour.

The vehicle involved in this accident was a Federal 5-ton truck with a trailer truck attached, loaded with boxes of autoparts and, respectively, 21 and 24 steel drums of turpentine, the gross weight of each vehicle being between 11 and 12 tons. This truck was en route to Toledo, proceeding eastward on North Line Road and was driven upon the tracks at a speed of about 12 miles an hour, the trailer truck evidently had just cleared the center of the southbound track when it was struck by train No. 226.

The trailer truck was thrown clear of the track and south of the highway and was totally demolished, while part of the contents of the trailer truck, including three drums of turpentine, were thrown into the front end of motor car 8002, the leading car of train No. 226. Both cars in the train remained on the rails and continued southward, passing the crossing a distance of about 550 feet before coming to a stop. A fire started shortly afterwards which destroyed car 8002. The employee killed was the motorman of that car.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Byers, of car 8002, said that almost immediately after sounding the usual road-crossing whistle signal approaching the point of accident, the motorman began sounding a long blast on the whistle, accompanied by a heavy brake application, following which the brakes were released and the motors were reversed, just before the collision occurred. Conductor Byers estimated the speed of his train just prior to the brake application to have been about 55 miles an hour, which speed was reduced, he thought, to about 40 or 45 miles an hour at the time of the impact. In company with Motorman Rollins, of the second car, he attempted to make his way to the head end of the first car, but the fire in the front end had much

such headway that the smoke and intense heat made it impossible to remain in the car to combat the fire with the extinguishers. After rendering such assistance as was possible to the passengers they then turned their attention to the second car, uncoupling it and moving it backwards a safe distance. The testimony of Motorman Rollins corroborated that of Conductor Byers in substance and brought out no additional facts of importance. Conductor Smith of the rear car went back to flag immediately after the occurrence of the accident. The statements of the employees also indicated that the headlight on the leading car was burning properly.

The driver of the automobile truck involved in this accident, Harry Culver, age 20 years, stated that he had been driving cars about four years and held driver's licenses in both Michigan and Ohio. He was returning to Toledo from Detroit, where he had gone in the morning of the day of the accident, and had passed over this crossing at that time. He said he had been over this crossing a number of times previously, and at the time of approaching it just prior to the occurrence of this accident he knew he was somewhere in the vicinity of it but on account of having the truck headlights dimmed, as required by a city ordinance, he was unable to identify his exact location and the first definite knowledge he had of being close to the crossing was upon seeing the reflection of the truck headlights on the rails about 20 or 25 feet distant ahead, and at the same time he noticed the approaching train which he thought was about 1,000 feet distant, moving at a speed of 50 or 60 miles an hour. He said his truck was moving at a speed of about 12 miles an hour, and, both truck and trailer being heavily loaded, he knew he could not stop within the distance between his truck and the tracks, while he could not increase the speed of his truck as it was then making the maximum speed with the load it carried. He said he realized that the crossing would be close and did not attempt to shift gears, knowing that such action would lessen the speed of his machine. When questioned as to why he had not noticed the approaching train sooner than he did, Mr. Culver replied that on account of having the truck headlights dimmed in compliance with a Wyandotte city ordinance, and driving on the extreme right side of the road on account of other cars passing his truck in both directions, he was giving his full attention to the road directly ahead.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the driver of an automobile proceeding upon a railroad crossing at grade directly in front of an approaching train.

This accident again calls attention to the vital necessity for automobile drivers to approach railroad crossings with caution and to make certain before proceeding over them that no train is approaching. In this case the driver of the truck was somewhat familiar with this crossing, at least he knew its approximate location and that it was unprotected except by a crossing sign, and in view of other unfavorable circumstances he should have been driving the truck at such a rate of speed that it could have been stopped before proceeding upon the crossing.

All of the employees of the railroad involved in this accident were experienced men, at the time of this 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.