

ACCIDENT ON THE UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD MINIDOKA, IDAHO
MARCH 19, 1937
INVESTIGATION NO. 2162

SUMMARY

Railroad: Union Pacific

Date: March 19, 1937

Location: Minidoka, Idaho

Kind of accident: Rear-end collision

Train involved: Freight : Freight

Train numbers: Extra 2555 : Extra 2002

Engine numbers: 2555 : 2002

Engine numbers: 27 cars and caboose : 16 cars and caboose

Speed: Standing : 12-15 m.p.h.

Track: 3 degree 30'curve; slight ascending grade for east-bound trains.

Weather: Clear

Time: 2 a.m.

Casualties: 2 killed and 3 injured

Cause: Failure of Extra 2002 to be operated under proper control within yard limits.

May 11, 1937

To the Commission:

On March 19, 1937, there was a rear-end collision between two freight trains on the Union Pacific Railroad at Minidoka, Ida., which resulted in the death of one employee and one stock caretaker, and the injury of three stock caretakers.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on the Twin Falls Branch of the Idaho Division, Central District, which extends between Buhl and Minidoka, Ida., a distance of 73.8 miles. In the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by timetable and train orders, no form of block system being in use. Trains in the same direction must keep at least 10 minutes apart, except in closing up at stations. The accident occurred within yard limits at a point 6,480 feet east of the yard-limit board. Approaching this point from the west on the Twin Falls Branch, the track is tangent for several miles, followed by a 3 degree 30'curve to the right 1,768 feet in length, the accident occurring on this curve at a point 707 feet from its western end. The grade for east-bound trains is 0.219 percent ascending at the point of accident.

The Twin Falls Branch connects with the main line of the Idaho Division at Minidoka and a Y is located at the junction; the main line of the Twin Falls Branch forms the south leg of the Y, upon which the accident occurred. An auxiliary track, known as track 2, parallels this leg of the Y on the north and joins it near the junction switch. Yard tracks parallel both sides of the main track on the Twin Falls Branch west of the Y, and at the time of the accident several cars were standing at the east end of track 7, which lies immediately south of the main track, and the range of vision of the engineman of an eastbound train across the curve to the point of accident was restricted to about 617 feet.

The maximum speed limit for freight trains within yard limits at stations located on branch lines is 15 miles per hour, and speed must be as much lower as conditions require.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 2 a.m.

Description

Extra 2555, an east-bound freight train, consisted of 27 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 2555, and was in charge of Conductor Johnson and Engineman Miller. This train departed from Burley, 21.7 miles from Minidoka, at 11:50 p.m., March 18, according to the train sheet, having passed Extra 2002 at that point, arrived at Minidoka at 1:25 a.m., March 19, and pulled out on the Idaho Division main track and stopped with the caboose near the station where 3 stock caretakers and a brakeman, off duty, boarded the caboose. The train was then backed down the Twin Falls Branch main track to clear No. 2. track; the engine and four cars were cut off in order to do station work, and while this was being done the rear portion of the train was struck by Extra 2002.

Extra 2002, an east-bound freight train, consisted of 16 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 2002, and was in charge of Conductor Wittman and Engineman Merritt. This train departed from Burley at 12:45 a.m., March 19, according to the train sheet, passed Rupert at 1:15 a.m. and collided with the rear end of Extra 2555 while traveling at a speed variously estimated to have been between 12 and 15 miles per hour.

Engine 2002 telescoped the caboose of Extra 2555 its entire length and partly telescoped the car ahead of the caboose, the caboose and rear car were demolished and the debris was destroyed by fire. The second car from the caboose was demolished, and the rear truck of the next car was derailed, this car being slightly damaged. Engine 2002 sustained only slight damage. The employee killed was a brakeman who was deadheading in the caboose of Extra 2555.

Summary of evidence

Conductor Johnson, of Extra 2555, stated that on arriving at Minidoka at 1:25 a.m. his train stopped with the caboose in front of the station. He went to the office and received instructions to pick up 10 cars of stock, together with three stockmen. He notified the stockmen to board the caboose at that time to avoid stopping the train later, and a brakeman, who was off duty, also boarded the caboose. About 1:35 a.m. the train was backed down the Twin Falls Branch main line for a distance of about 24 car lengths; the air brakes were applied and a cut was made between the fourth and fifth cars. The head portion, accompanied by the entire crew, then departed to perform necessary station work and they were so engaged when the rear portion of the train was struck by Extra 2002. The caboose marker and cupola lights were in good condition and were burning brightly. Conductor Johnson stated that he had been on this run for the past 3 years and he had frequently left his caboose on the main line. The statements of the other members of the crew of Extra 2555 added nothing of importance.

Engineman Merritt, of Extra 2002, stated that he entered the yard-limits at a speed of approximately 15 miles per hour, and found it necessary to use steam in order to maintain that speed. Approaching the highway grade crossing, located about 490 feet west of the point of accident, he was operating with a drifting throttle, and as he sounded the crossing whistle signal a man stepped out from behind some cars that were standing on track 7, and from his actions appeared to have been struck by the engine. Engineman Merritt then looked back to see what had happened to the man and did not look ahead again until after the engine had passed over the crossing; he then saw red marker lights ahead, one bright and the other dim. He was unable to tell whether the lights were on the main track or track 2, which was to the left of the main track, and he hesitated a moment before applying the brakes. In an instant, however, he was able to locate the marker lights definitely and he closed the throttle and applied the air brakes in emergency; at that time he thought he was

about 6 car lengths from the caboose. He was of the opinion that if his attention had not been distracted by the man near the crossing he would have seen the train ahead in time to stop, and would have realized the fact that the marker lights that he saw were red and indicated that the rear end was on the main track. Engineman Merritt stated that he had found trains standing on the main track at various points within the yard, but on the night of the accident he figured that Extra 2555 had plenty of time to have left Minidoka before the arrival of his train.

Fireman Hatch, of Extra 2002, stated that his train moved through yard limits at approximately 15 miles per hour. Due to the curve to the right approaching the junction at Minidoka his view ahead was very much restricted. Immediately after passing the road crossing he heard the air brakes applied in emergency, looked out and saw the caboose marker lights about 5 or 6 car lengths ahead. He further stated that the air brakes functioned properly en route, but did not seem to take hold as rapidly as they should when the emergency application was made, and that Engineman Merritt had sounded the whistle signal for the highway crossing.

Conductor Wittman, of Extra 2002, stated that the air brakes had been tested at Twin Falls, their initial terminal, and he estimated the speed to have been 15 miles per hour or less when he felt the air brakes being applied in emergency, followed in a second or two by the collision. Swing Brakeman Allen thought the train traveled a distance of about 3 or 4 car lengths after the brakes had been applied, while Flagman Hahne stated that it seemed quite a while to him from the time the air brakes were applied in emergency to the time of the accident.

Discussion

Rule 93 provides that within yard limits the main track may be used, protecting against first-class trains. All trains and engines must move within yard limits prepared to stop unless the main track is seen or known to be clear. Special instructions in the timetable limit the speed of freight trains within yard limits on branch lines to 15 miles per hour, and require a lower speed when conditions require it.

Engineman Merritt, of Extra 2002, was operating his train at the allowable speed of 15 miles per hour within the yard limits, but on approaching a highway grade crossing, located 490 feet west of the point of accident, his attention was attracted by a man who stepped out from behind some cars standing on the yard track south of the main track, and he did not look ahead until after passing the crossing, at which time he saw the caboose marker lights. Even then he hesitated before taking any action toward stopping his train as he was not sure whether the train ahead was on the main track or on track 2 which paralleled the main track on the left. An instant later, however, he saw that the train was on the main track and applied the air brakes in emergency, at which time he thought his engine was about 5 or 6 car lengths from it. Statements of the entire crew indicated that the speed of Extra 2002 was not in excess of 15 miles per hour when the emergency application was made, but the damage sustained indicates that either the speed was higher, or the distance was less than estimated.

Conclusion

This accident was caused by the failure of Extra 2002 to be operated under proper control within yard limits