

IN RE INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT ON THE ERIE RAILROAD NEAR
RITTMAN, OHIO, ON JUNE 4, 1918.

July 16, 1918.

On June 4, 1918, there was a head-end collision between an empty troop train and a light engine on the Erie Railroad near Rittman, Ohio, which resulted in the death of 5 employees and 1 Pullman porter, and the injury of 3 employees. After investigation the Chief of the Bureau of Safety reports as follows:

The Kent division upon which this accident occurred is a double-track line extending between Kent and Marion, Ohio, a distance of 113.5 miles, over which trains are operated by automatic block signals. Trains moving against the current of traffic are operated by train orders transmitted by telephone. The general direction of the tracks is east and west, the north track being used for westbound traffic and the south track for eastbound traffic.

Westbound extra 4027 consisting of locomotive 4027 and a caboose, left Kent at 9.55 p.m. on June 3rd in charge of Conductor Shoemaker and Engineer Smith. Upon arriving at Kenmore, Ohio, 48 cars were added to the train; it left there at 11.54 p.m. and arrived at Silver Creek, Ohio, 22.3 miles west of Kent, and 7.8 miles west of Kenmore, at 12.19 a.m., June 4th. On account of the siding being blocked this train pulled down the main track; some of the cars were cut off and taken to Wadsworth and the locomotive returned to Silver Creek, working there until it ran out of water. The locomotive was then cut off and taken

to Sterling, Ohio, 9.8 miles west of Silver Creek, for water. After getting water the enginemen received train order No. 5, reading as follows:

Ex. 3153 west has right over opposing trains on eastward track Silver Creek to Rittman.

Locomotive 4027 left Sterling at 4.11 a.m. on the eastbound track, backing up, and was proceeding eastward at a speed of 10 or 15 miles an hour when it collided with extra 3153 at a point about one mile west of Rittman at about 4.30 a.m. Rittman is located 6.4 miles west of Silver Creek and Sterling is 3.4 miles west of Rittman.

Westbound extra 3153 consisted of locomotive 3153, 1 box car, 14 Pullman sleeping cars and a caboose, all empty troop train equipment, and was in charge of Conductor Wolfe and Engineman Evans. It left Kent at 3.10 a.m., and arrived at Silver Creek at 3.55 a.m. where the crew received a copy of train order No. 5 reading as follows:

Ex 3153 west has right over opposing trains on eastward track Silver Creek to Sterling.

This train left Silver Creek at 4.09 a.m. over the eastbound track and collided with extra 3153 while running at a speed of about 30 miles an hour.

The rear trucks of the tender of locomotive 4027 were derailed and the rear end of the tender lay on the front part of the frame of locomotive 3153. The upper part of the front end of the tender was forced partially into the cab of locomotive 4027. Locomotive 3153 remained upright on the roadbed with its front trucks, first, second and third driving wheels derailed, but the

rear driving wheels and trailing trucks remained on the track. The tender lay on its right side diagonally across the westbound track with its front end immediately behind locomotive 3153. The box car immediately behind the tender was telescoped its entire length by the sleeping car behind it. The sleeping car was partially tipped over toward the north with its head end against the rear end of the tender and its rear end on the road bed of the eastbound track. The head end of the sleeping car was crushed in for a distance of about 8 feet. The remainder of the train remained on the track. The engineman, conductor, fireman and head brakeman of extra 3153 and the fireman on locomotive 4027 were killed.

Approaching the point of accident from Rittman there is a 2-degree curve to the right, 500 feet long, then a tangent 2,000 feet long, then a 2-degree curve to the right about 2,000 feet long, the accident occurring about 40 feet from the east end of this curve. At the point of accident the track is laid on a 12-foot fill and there is an ascending grade of .7% for westbound trains. Under favorable conditions, enginemen on westbound trains could see about 700 feet beyond point of collision when within 3,000 feet of it, and enginemen on eastbound trains could see point of accident when within 1,200 feet of it. The weather at time was clear.

Engineman Smith of extra 4027 stated that after taking water at Sterling he received train order No. 3 from the operator there, stating that extra 3153 had right over opposing trains on

eastward track to Rittman, and he started back toward Rittman expecting to meet extra 3153 there. When he reached a point about one mile west of Rittman he saw the headlight of extra 3153 on the curve but could not tell on what track the train was running until it was within 10 or 15 car lengths.

He called to employees on the locomotive to jump, tried to stop the locomotive and proceed in the opposite direction, but before he could bring it to a stop the collision occurred.

Flagman Hudson of extra 3153 stated that when his train stopped at Silver Creek Conductor Wolfe told him their train would proceed to Sterling over the eastbound track. The train left there and was running at a speed of about 30 miles an hour when the collision occurred.

Fireman Boyer of extra 3153 was fatally injured, but before his death he stated that he read train order No. 3 that was delivered to the engineer at Silver Creek, and that the order directed his train to use the eastbound track from Silver Creek to Sterling. He thought the speed of his train was about 30 miles an hour at the time of the collision, but it was dark and he was putting in a fire and did not see locomotive 4027.

Operator Sanders, who was on duty at Silver Creek, stated that on June 4th Dispatcher Ballenger gave him an order over the telephone giving extra 3153 right over opposing trains on eastward track from Silver Creek to Rittman and he repeated the order back to the dispatcher. In copying the order he put down "westward track" instead of "eastward track," and for that reason re-copied it, and in order to get the practice he copied the order

about ten times. In recopying it he erroneously inserted Starl in place of Rittman, but could give no reason for doing so other than that he had Sterling fixed in his mind on account of locomotive 4027 going there for water. When extra 3153 arrived there picked up the required number of copies of the order, picking on those that looked the best, and delivered them to the crew; he did not discover he had made an error in copying the order until after that train had departed. He said he called the dispatcher for the purpose of notifying him of the mistake, but found that he was busy and said nothing to him about it. Operator Sanders stated that he was sixteen years of age and had been employed a third trick operator at Silver Creek for about two months and a half; that he had been employed as a maintainer at Silver Creek for two or three weeks before being employed as an operator, and during that time had watched the operator there manipulate the levers and copy orders. When he was employed as an operator a man worked in the tower with him one day to instruct him. He said he was given a physical examination before being employed and filled out a paper, the contents of which he did not remember. He had been asked if he could secure the book of rules his brother had in his possession when he was operator there, and wrote to for it, but received a reply from his brother that he never had book of rules. Operator Sanders did not have a book of rules and did not know whether the dispatcher was aware he had been unable to secure one from his brother; he had prepared a message to his superior stating his inability to secure the book, but did not know whether it had been sent. He said he was not instructed

as to his duties except that the second trick operator showed him how to write a train order a couple of times and was caution by him to be very careful in copying orders.

Dispatcher Ballenger stated that he went on duty at midnight and the siding at Silver Creek being blocked he advised the conductor of extra 4027 to work on the main track. When locomotive 4027 ran out of water a member of the train crew called him up and said it had gone to Sterling for water and told him the siding had not been cleared. Dispatcher Ballenger stated that he called up Operator Sanders at Silver Creek and explained to him that the siding track and main track were blocked at Silver Creek and that engine 4027 had gone to Sterling for water. He said he told Operator Sanders that when extra 3153 arrived that train would be run over the eastbound track from Silver Creek to Pittman, and asked him if he understood, and he replied that he did. He then issued train order No. 3, and when Operator Sanders repeated it back to him, Dispatcher Ballenger said to him: "Now, you hold that 3153 right there at the office for a little bit, stop them right at the office and hold them there." He then called the operator at Sterling, gave him train order No. 3 to be delivered to Engineman Smith of locomotive 4027. When informed of the accident he called up Operator Sanders and asked him to repeat the order he gave extra 3153 and he repeated it correctly. Dispatcher Ballenger asked him if that was the order he gave that train, and Operator Sanders replied that he had copied the order over and had given the copy to extra 3153, and when he was asked to read that copy, he read: "3153 be right over opposing trains over eastward track from Silver Creek

Sterling."

This accident was caused by Operator Sanders making an error in copying train order No. 3, thereby giving extra 5155 right over opposing trains from Silver Creek to Sterling instead of to Kittman.

Chief Dispatcher Folsom stated that he had experienced considerable difficulty in securing experienced operators, and when the operator at Silver Creek was called to the army his brother F. K. Sanders, wanted the position, and as there was no one else available to fill the position he was employed. He said he understood that Operator Sanders had been around the tower at Silver Creek with his brother some little time and believed he was somewhat familiar with the duties there; he was therefore employed brought to Marion where he filled out an application blank, and was directed to report to the trainmaster for an examination which Dispatcher Folsom supposed included examination on the book of rules. Dispatcher Folsom said it was not the practice to put a man to work in a tower who had not been around a tower and was not familiar with its operation. He said one of the reasons they were unable to hold their operators was because there are so many connecting lines near that paid more money for that work. He had had complaints from dispatchers about the way Operator Sanders performed his duties, but he was the best he could get at that time. He stated that it was the duty of the chief dispatcher to furnish operators with a book of rules, but said Operator Sanders told him he could get a book of rules from his brother and he presumed that he did secure it, and therefore charged it to him.

While the direct responsibility for this accident rests with Operator Saunders, this investigation disclosed that he was but sixteen years of age and had been employed as an operator at Silver Creek since April 25, 1918, without previous experience as an operator. He had not been furnished with a book of operating rules and had been given very little instruction as to his duties, and on account of his youth, lack of training and experience he was not competent to assume the important duties of operator and receive, copy and deliver train orders. In this case he entered "complete" on the order at the time it was issued not waiting until it was completed by the dispatcher, and he copied the order several times; he was not sufficiently informed to realize that in both of these respects he was violating fundamental rules essential to the safety of railroad operation. And even after he discovered his error in copying the order he was not sufficiently alive to the gravity of the situation to inform the dispatcher, his excuse being that the dispatcher was busy and he did not want to interrupt him.

The operating officials on the West Division of the Erie Railroad should be severely censured for employing and keeping in service in a responsible position a boy without judgment, training or experience, and particularly without proper instruction or examination.

If the circumstances surrounding this accident give any indication of conditions and practices existing on that portion of the Erie Railroad, there is urgent need for the adoption

of some systematic method of instructing and examining employees and of exercising necessary supervision over them.

At the time of this accident Operator Sanders had been on duty 4 hours and 50 minutes.

J.O.T.