

INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

WASHINGTON

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR

BUREAU OF SAFETY

ACCIDENT ON THE

NEW YORK CENTRAL RAILROAD

RIGA, MICH.

JULY 9, 1936

INVESTIGATION NO. 2078

SUMMARY

Railroad: New York Central
Date: July 9, 1936
Location: Riga, Mich.
Kind of accident: Collision with motor road scraper
Equipment involved: Passenger train : Motor road scraper
Train number: No. 607 :
Engine number: 3322 :
Consist: 5 cars :
Speed: 60 m.p.h. : 8-10 m.p.h.
Track: Straight and level for several miles
in each direction; view restricted
by trees at crossing; highway unim-
proved, with fixed sign as only
protection at crossing.
Weather: Clear
Time: 6:44 a.m.
Casualties: 1 killed; 1 injured
Cause: Road scraper driven on crossing
directly in front of approaching
train.

July 28, 1936.

To the Commission:

On July 9, 1936, there was a collision between a passenger train and a road scraper at a highway grade crossing on the New York Central Railroad near Riga, Mich., which resulted in the death of the driver of the road scraper and the injury of one railroad employee.

Location and method of operation

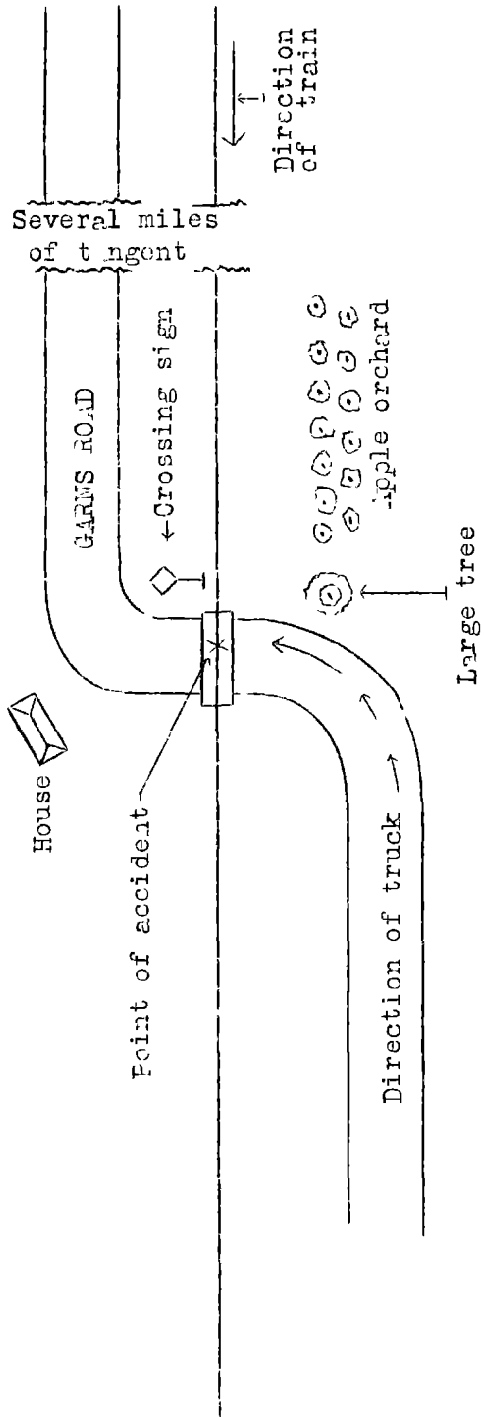
This accident occurred on the Old Road Section of the Toledo Division, which extends between Toledo, Ohio, and Elkhart, Ind., a distance of 142.42 miles; in the vicinity of the point of accident this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time table, train orders, and a manual block-signal system. The accident occurred at a point approximately 3.32 miles east of the station at Riga, where the track crosses a county road known as Garns Road; approaching this point from the east on the railroad, the track is tangent and practically level for several miles to and beyond the crossing.

Approaching from the west on the highway, Garns Road parallels the railroad track on the south for more than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile, then makes a turn to the left and passes northward over the crossing, following which it makes a turn to the right and parallels the railroad track on the north for a considerable distance. The highway is an unimproved dirt road, 16 feet in width, and is about 60 feet from the track at the point where the left turn begins; there is a slight rise toward the track on either approach, the crossing proper being composed of heavy oak planks. A diamond shaped warning sign is located on the right or east side of the crossing and about 15 feet north of the track; it is about 15 feet in height, painted white with black lettering reading "RAILROAD CROSSING LOOK OUT FOR THE CARS".

There is an apple orchard south of the track and east of the highway, also a large tree with overhanging branches extending toward the track, restricting the view of an approaching west-bound train to be had by the driver of an east-bound vehicle on the highway; after making the left turn, however, and when 40 feet from the track, an approaching west-bound train can be seen for a long distance.

Inv. No. 2075
New York Central R.R.
Riga, Mich.
July 9, 1936

○ Toledo, Ohio	
	14.85 mi.
○ Ottawa Lake, Mich.	5.21 mi.
X (Point of accident)	
○ Riga, Mich.	
	122.36 mi.
○ Elkhart, Indiana	



The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred about 6:44 a.m.

Description

Train No. 607, a west-bound passenger train, consisted of 1 express car, 1 baggage-mail car, 1 coach and 2 refrigerator cars, in the order named, hauled by engine 3322, and was in charge of Conductor Albertson and Engineman Bohnert. The first 3 cars were of all-steel construction, while the last 2 cars were of steel-underframe construction. This train passed Ottawa Lake, the last open office, 5.21 miles east of Riga, at 6:42 a.m., according to the train sheet, 3 minutes late, and was approaching Riga when it struck the road scraper at the crossing while traveling at a speed estimated to have been about 60 miles per hour.

The road scraper consisted of a 6-cylinder, 4-ton Dodge motor truck, 1933 model, with a steel cab in front, dual rear wheels and hydraulic brakes; it had a wheel base of 164 inches, and carried two gasoline tanks, with a total capacity of 42 gallons, one located under the driver's seat and the other on the running board under the right door. This vehicle was owned by Lenawee County, Mich., and was assigned to road commission work; it was equipped with a pneumatic road scraper, attached to the frame of the truck ahead of the rear wheels, and extending diagonally across at an angle of 40°; the scraper was operated by air, with the control valves located in the cab, and when the scraper blade was raised it had a clearance of 6 inches above the surface of the road. The truck was being operated by Paul Piotter, Blissfield, Mich., and was moving over the crossing, probably at a speed not in excess of 10 miles per hour, when it was struck by Train No. 607.

The scraper was practically demolished, the rear portion of it being thrown to the south of the track and about 132 feet west of the crossing, while the front portion was carried on the front end of the engine a distance of 2,760 feet to where the train stopped. The scraper blade fell on top of the rails when the accident occurred and the front wheels of the engine truck mounted this blade and then were carried in that position; the train, however, was not derailed. The gasoline tanks of the truck were broken and blazing gasoline was sprayed over the train, resulting in damage by fire to the engine and cars. The railroad employee injured was the fireman.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Kosier, of Train No. 607, stated that he was riding on his seat box as the train approached the crossing at

a speed of about 58 or 60 miles per hour; the engine bell was ringing and the proper whistle signal was sounded for the crossing. When a short distance east of the crossing he noticed the road scraper grading the road on the south side of the track. Dust was flying, but before the scraper made the turn at the south approach to the crossing the dust stopped, indicating that the driver had raised the scraper blade. The speed of the scraper was about 20 miles per hour and the fireman thought it would stop for the crossing, but instead of so doing it continued upon the crossing directly in front of the engine, and then the fireman realized that a collision was imminent and shouted a warning of danger to the engineman. Fireman Kosier also said that the driver of the scraper was in an enclosed cab, therefore he could not see him or tell what action he took just prior to the accident.

Engineman Bohnert, of Train No. 607, said he was whistling for the crossing, that the automatic bell ringer was working, and that he did not see the road scraper prior to the accident, being unaware of anything wrong until the fireman shouted a warning of danger, the accident occurring while the train was moving at a speed he estimated to have been about 60 miles per hour. Blazing gasoline drifting by the cab window from the wreckage of the truck on the front end of the engine forced him to leave his seat box, but as soon as the fire had died down he made a heavy service application of the brakes and stopped the train. Statements of Conductor Albertson and Brakeman Thieman brought out nothing additional of importance.

Mrs. Hermine Hansen, a local resident, whose house is situated about 125 feet north of the track and almost opposite the crossing, was an eye witness to the accident. She watched the scraper as it approached from the west, scraping the road, and then heard the train whistling for the crossing and wondered whether the scraper would stop. It did not stop, however, but proceeded at a low rate of speed upon the crossing directly in front of the approaching train. There was no other automobile in the vicinity at the time.

Roadmaster Britton stated that the road scraper had been working on the highway west of the turn at the south approach to the crossing, but he did not see any scraper marks on the road within a distance of 40 feet from the crossing. The crossing is not used to any great extent, primarily serving local residents.

According to information furnished by the Lenawee County Road Commission, the driver of the road scraper, Paul Plotter, was 42 years of age, a licensed operator, and considered to be an experienced driver. He was employed as a truck driver on April 1, 1935, and formerly had operated a truck for a

lumber company. No special driving instructions were issued and the work assignment for the day was to scrape the road in the morning and to haul stone in the afternoon. The State Police Department record showed that he had had 10 years' experience as a motor vehicle operator.

Foreman Loveland, in charge of the county road employees in this area, stated that Driver Piotter went off duty at 5 p.m.; July 8; he resumed duty at 6:30 a.m., July 9, at which time he appeared to be normal in every respect and in good spirits, and the foreman also said that on the way to work the driver had ridden with him from Blissfield to Victorville, a distance of about 5 miles, and that during that ride he had an opportunity to observe his condition and actions. He considered him to be a good, safe driver, but said that neither he nor any of his men were very familiar with this particular road, it having only recently been taken over by the county, about the first of the year. The scraper apparently was in good condition, and the driver did not make any report of or take any exceptions to its condition; it was equipped with a speed governor that restricted speed to 28 miles per hour, and he said the best speed attainable when scraping a road would be between 8 and 10 miles per hour.

Highway Commissioner Taylor was unable to account for the accident, unless it was that when scraping the dry road considerable dust was raised, while the view was somewhat restricted until the turn in the road was made and the truck started up the slight rise of the south approach to the track. Apparently the driver raised the scraper blade at this point, and this operation being rather slow he probably was looking out of the left cab door of the truck to ascertain whether the blade was properly raised before going over the crossing and in this manner proceeded upon the track directly in front of the train without knowing that it was approaching.

Discussion

The investigation of this accident developed that the train was approaching the crossing at a speed of about 60 miles per hour, with the whistle blowing and the engine bell ringing. Notwithstanding these warnings, however, it appeared that the driver of the road scraper did not stop, but drove his vehicle on the crossing directly in front of the approaching train. The driver's view was not good until he made the turn approaching the crossing, but when at a safe distance from the track he could have seen the approaching train for a long distance, thus giving him ample time in which to stop and wait until it had passed. While no definite statement can be made as to the reason for the failure of the driver to stop, or for his apparent failure to notice the approaching train, the

investigation developed that the scraper had been in operation immediately prior to the occurrence of the accident and it is possible that the driver was engaged in looking out of the left side of his cab for the purpose of ascertaining whether the scraper blade was properly raised before passing over the crossing, and in this manner failed to notice the train approaching from his right.

The crossing at which this accident occurred, while unprotected, is not of a particularly dangerous nature; the highway is unimproved and carries very little traffic, being used principally by local residents.

Conclusion

This accident was caused by a motor road scraper being driven on a highway grade crossing directly in front of an approaching train.

Respectfully submitted,

W. J. PATTERSON,

Director.