UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Investigation of:	*
	*
BNSF RAILWAY ROADWAY WORKER FATALITIES IN EDGEMONT, SOUTH DAKOTA ON JANUARY 17, 2017	* Accident No.: DCA17FR004
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Interview of: AARON RATLEDGE

Haslet, Texas

Friday,
January 20, 2017

APPEARANCES:

RYAN FRIGO, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

MARK SCHULZE, Vice President of Safety, Training
and Operations Support
BNSF Railway
(On behalf of Mr. Ratledge)

I N D E X

I N T E R V I E W

MR. FRIGO: My name is Ryan Frigo, and I am the Operations Group Chairman for NTSB on this accident. We are here today on January 20, 2017, in Haslet, Texas, to conduct an interview with Mr. Aaron Ratledge, who works for BNSF. This interview is in conjunction with NTSB's investigation of two roadway worker fatalities in Edgemont, South Dakota, on January 17, 2017. The NTSB accident reference number is DCA17FR004.

Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name, and please identify who you are representing and your title. I would remind everybody to speak clearly so we can get an accurate recording.

My name is Ryan Frigo. The spelling of my last name is F-r-i-g-o. I am the Operations Group Chair for NTSB on this accident.

MR. RATLEDGE: My name is Aaron Ratledge, R-a-t-l-e-d-g-e, and I am the general director of operating practices and rules for BNSF Railway.

MR. FRIGO: And, Mr. Ratledge, are you okay if we go on a first-name basis?

MR. RATLEDGE: Yes, sir.

MR. FRIGO: Aaron. Thank you. And do I have your permission to record our discussion today?

MR. RATLEDGE: Yes.

MR. FRIGO: And do you wish to have a representative with you?

MR. RATLEDGE: Yes.

MR. SCHULZE: This is Mark Schulze. Last name is spelled S-c-h-u-l-z-e. I'm the vice president of safety, training and operations support at BNSF Railway.

MR. FRIGO: Thank you. And I just have to read a few other items into the record, and we can begin. Aaron, as we talked before, the NTSB, we don't assign blame. It's fact finding. There's no guarantee against legal action or certificate actions. And a copy of this transcript will go into the public docket.

INTERVIEW OF AARON RATLEDGE

BY MR. FRIGO:

Q. So, Aaron, if we can begin with -- you know, if you can just give me a synopsis of your work experience on the railroad, how long you've been here, and kind of take me from the beginning to your present job.

A. Um-hum, sure. So I started out with one of BNSF's predecessor railroads, the Santa Fe Railway, in 1994, as a switchman, a brakeman, new hire conductor. And I performed those duties for about 3 years, and then I became a locomotive engineer in 1997, running all train types in New Mexico between Clovis and Belen, and also Clovis and Carlsbad as a locomotive engineer.

At that point in time I became -- started my entry level management position as a assistant trainmaster there in Clovis.

Did that for about 10 months, and then I was promoted to a trainmaster in St. Louis, Missouri, where I performed those duties for about 3 years. And then became a road foreman of engines in Birmingham, Alabama. I performed that function for about 18 months, and then I came to Fort Worth, Texas, the first time as a senior manager of train handling, operating practices. I was in that capacity for 3 years, and then I moved to Kansas City, Kansas as a superintendent of operating practices. Was promoted to a superintendent of operations a few months after that.

Fulfilled the duties of a superintendent of operations for 3 years, where I came back to Fort Worth in 2010 to assume the duties of director of train handling for BNSF. And it was about 3 years ago, in 2013, where I became the general director of operating practices, and that's currently my -- the position I'm filling today. So long history of operational -- railroad operations on the transportation side.

Q. Great, Aaron. Thank you for -- thanks for sharing that with me. We're here to talk about what happened up in Edgemont, and I believe that you were in the area at the time and you were there to conduct testing on a piece of equipment. If you could tell us what brought you to Edgemont and tell us a little bit about the test train, that would be helpful.

A. You bet. So part of my duties as general director of operating practices and rules is we have the locomotive technology side, which involves distributive power. And so distributive

power is a technology that's manufactured by General Electric Transportation Systems out of Melbourne, Florida. And we also have to do testing as part of my requirements and duties to ensure the safety of those products. And so we had had for several weeks, I want to say even maybe several months, had a -- had this test train or this test plan in the works and in the making to where we identified a cut of 10,000 feet of auto racks was here on the Deadwood spur in Edgemont.

And so, in kind, we made our plans to conduct our test in Edgemont where these cars were in storage. And we coordinated with General Electric and a few others from my team and the locals here to prep to begin plans to be able to facilitate that test on the 17th of January.

Q. Okay. And when did you arrive in -- when did you put together the test plan?

A. So the test plan was put together, again, like I said, several weeks before, and coordinating with the locals, with Jim Korecky and also Shad Sowers, who are local to Edgemont. We began corresponding several weeks prior to our arrival.

Q. Okay. And as part of that test plan, can you recall if the use of maintenance-of-way personnel were included in that test plan?

A. No. They were not.

Q. When did you arrive in Edgemont?

A. Approximately 8, 8:30 on Tuesday morning.

Q. That was the 16th, I believe?
A. 17th.
Q. The 17th. Okay. So that was your -- you weren't in Edgemont prior to?
A. No. We flew into Rapid City on Monday, and then overnighted in Hot Springs, and then traveled over Tuesday morning to Edgemont.
Q. Can you recall approximately what time you arrived in Edgemont?
A. Approximately 8:30.
Q. Okay. And if you can tell me a little bit about your activities once you -- approximately 8:30 you arrive in Edgemont. Where did you go? Who did you talk to?
A. Yeah. Right. And so I'm going to be -- you know, approximately at 8:30, that's the best I can to my recollection. But I recall coming into town and noticing our string of auto wrecks just off to the left side of the highway that we were coming into town on, and noticing that there was some snow that was built up between the crossings where the cars had previously been cut. And I noticed there was an individual, I couldn't tell exactly who it was, that was clearing some ice, snow from the track between -- right around the crossing.

And then we made it up to the head end of the train where we then joined up with Tony Erickson, the superintendent of operating practices there for the Powder River Division, where we briefed

and talked, and kind of got an update as to how the progress was going on getting the train together and prepping it to come out on the main track.

And at that point in time, we discussed that we were going to go back to the depot to print some lists of the cars as they stood in the Deadwood spur so that we could begin making plans on where we were going to affix our equipment, our monitoring devices, electronic monitoring devices that we had brought with us or the GE had brought with him, who was essentially hosting the devices.

And so we went to the depot and were there, printed the list out, reviewing them. We got the test equipment out and laid it out, and we were -- GE was -- when I say GE, it was our representative from GE that was there with us, who was in the process of getting those instruments synced up. At that point in time, he and another gentleman from my group, Mark Jones, had indicated they needed to go back to Hot Springs to get a device that they had forgotten or that he had forgotten. And that we had talked that they had plenty of time to go back and do that because our crew was still getting the train together, and we felt that it was still going to be a little bit longer before we actually came out on the main track and were going to be ready.

So they went back to Hot Springs. Jeff Garrels and myself stayed there in the depot with Tony Erickson. And several minutes went by, maybe even an hour, whenever Tony Erickson got a call from either one of his -- his trainmaster or his road foreman

indicating that there had been an incident. And then we immediately got in the cars, our rental vehicle, and we followed Tony out to the scene of the incident where we saw the aftermath.
Q. All right, Aaron, I just -- I want to go back to -- I want to talk a little bit more about that test train and what you can remember. And, again, if you can't remember, just let me know that.
A. Okay.
Q. You mentioned that they were still preparing the train. So am I to think that it wasn't laced up and it wasn't put together yet, and --
A. That's correct. So like I said, when I showed up, was driving into town, I noticed that there was three crossings that needed to be put together and to be aired up. And it was very cold that morning. We noticed that it was 1 degree when we came into town. And we knew that it was going to take some time to pump the train up and to get air on it. So, yes, they were still working the train.
Q. Okay. And as far as the -- you mentioned the instrumentation that would be used for the testing, was that on the train already?
A. No. It was our plan that once we occupied the main track we would then install the test devices on the north side of the train.
Q. Okay. So, again, if you could just kind of walk me through that process how that would happen? Because you were in the

depot.
A. Um-hum.
Q. And how would you know when to go out there --
A. Right.
Q. -- with the representative from GE to start placing the instrumentation on the train?
A. So we would have gotten a call from either Mr. Shad Sowers or Jim Korecky, the trainmaster or road foreman, indicating that it was our turn or it was time to come out on the main track. And at that point in time when we heard -- when we got that indication, then we would get our gear and devices, and then make our way out to that point at that time.
Q. Okay. And when you say that point, what was the -- where was that location where you were going to put the test?
A. It would have been north -- or, excuse me -- west of milepost 477.
Q. Okay.
A. Or the west switch of the Y. On the main track. We would have had the train completely on the main track.
Q. And that would have been on Main 1?
A. Yes, sir.
Q. Okay. And you mentioned it was 10,000 feet, huh?
A. It as just shy of 10,000 feet, correct.
Q. So how long would it take you to -- did you estimate in your test plan that it would take you to place that instrumentation on?

A. There was six or seven test devices. We had vehicles. We had access to the right-of-way. It only takes probably 2 or 3 minutes to install each device at certain points of the train. I'm not even sure we were actually going to be using all six or seven. We would install in intervals as to how we needed to be able to measure the flow and the brake pipe pressures and so on.
Q. Was there any specific times for initiating the tests --
A. No.
Q. -- as part of your plan?
A. No. Like I say, we were in no hurry. Once we -- once the traffic allowed and we were able to occupy the main track, then we would make our way out there. The test was only going to take at most 6 to 7 hours, and then we'd put the train back in where we got it and be done.
Q. Okay.
A. This was a static test where there's no movement. Once we come out on the main track and, obviously, we wanted to come out on the main track so we didn't have any crossings fouled, so we -- I mean, so we could all be in one piece, obviously, to be ale to conduct our testing satisfactorily.
Q. So it was a static test?
A. Yes, sir.
Q. Okay. Can you just, can you describe the test a little bit more?
A. You bet. So part of the distributive power functionality is

we've got to test to make sure that we can have proper air brake propagation signals go throughout the train. If an engineer sets the brakes from the head end, we've got to make sure that that propagation can adequately go and be transmitted from the head end to the rear end, where the rear end can see that set to where it acknowledges that and it takes the power down, so to speak, if they're in a com loss scenario from the head to the rear.

So it was our purpose that day is to test those brake pipe propagation rates to make sure that we cold successfully have a 10,000 foot train in that capacity to be safe.

Q. And did -- I guess, were future plans set up to run dynamic testing as well?

A. Not at this -- no, not at this point it was not.

Q. Okay. So for right now it was just to perform the static test, gather data?

A. Yes. So it, so this -- typically our test plans is that we typically do a static test, and if we see favorable results, then at that time we plan a dynamic test to ensure the successfulness of that before we roll that out even further.

Q. Aaron, thank you for helping me understand that a little more.

A. Absolutely.

Q. You haven't mentioned yet any of -- coming in contact with any maintenance-of-way individuals. Can you -- I just want to ask you to remember as best as you can from that morning, you know,

arriving in Edgemont approximately 8:30 in the morning and until the time of the accident, do you recall ever coming into contact with any maintenance-of-way personnel?

A. No. I mean, the only time that I -- that, I mean, I could have seen a potential maintenance-of-way person would have been at one of those crossings, but I never stopped and talked to them. I cannot remember seeing the section truck, per se. So I'm not sure if it was a -- if it was Mr. Korecky or Mr. Sowers out there trying to clean debris. I just don't know who it was. But I at no point in time ever recognized and saw a maintenance-of-way individual that morning.

Q. You mentioned two names there. Are those members of the train crew?

A. Mr. Korecky is the trainmaster there in Edgemont, and Mr. Sowers is the is the road foreman of engines.

Q. Is the road foreman. Okay. And when you saw that individual at the crossing, did you notice any pieces of equipment? A backhoe, a digger or anything?

A. No. I just -- I remember the person having a square nose shovel or just a shovel of some type.

Q. Okay. Do employees at BNSF -- do operating employees wear a distinct color hard hat or vest --

A. Yes.

Q. -- there in the field?

A. Yes.

Q. What color is it? Can you describe that?
A. A bright orange high visibility vest and also hard hats.
Q. Okay. Is it --
A. Orange or white.
Q. Orange or white. And what about for maintenance-of-way? Do you know, do they have a distinct color of hard hat or on their vest?
A. The same color of vest that train crews wear, high visibility orange, and typically an orange or a white hard hat.
Q. Okay. And the only reason I ask you is just you mentioned seeing someone at the crossing, and just seeing that there might be a way to identify if that was an operating --
A. Right. And I can't even remember -- I could not tell you, I can't remember if the individual -- I didn't notice if the individual had a hard hat or not.
Q. Okay. And, again, let's talk about from when you arrived until the accident time. Did anybody, any of the operating crew or the individuals that were assisting with the testing, did anybody mention calling the section gang or requesting the section gang? Can you remember any --
A. No. I don't recall any of that.
Q. When you were in the depot, were you monitoring any radio transmissions?
A. No.
Q. Okay.

A. No.
Q. And I just want to ask you a few more questions about when you first arrived on the scene. Can you describe was there a truck there? Was there a digger there? Can you just describe a little bit more about --
A. Yes.
Q. -- about what you saw?
A. Yes. So when we were coming over the overpass, we would have been in an eastbound or northbound direction. I remember distinctly looking. I saw the train there stopped. The engines were on the other side of the intermediate signal there, and I distinctly remember looking over to my left and down, and seeing an individual laying next to the train. And I also noticed there was a section truck just beyond that.

And then we actually went down and came and around. We have to go over, and we have to come in and around by the Deadwood Y, and then make the big long swoop to get underneath the underpass to get up to where they were. I just remember seeing the individual -- I didn't know who it was at the time -- laying there not moving next to the track. And just, I remember getting out and -- I don't want to say I was yelling, but I was frantically asking, what happened? Is there anybody hurt? Is there anybody that needs help? And I was told at that time there was two individuals that had -- that were nonresponsive.
Q. Thank you for sharing that. I know it's not easy to talk

about that stuff. I just want to ask you a few more questions on your response.

Can you recall when you were driving to the scene what the position of the test train was?

A. Not specifically. I know that they were still north of that crossing of where they were at the time I was there. They had not pulled up or came around or anything. I'm wanting to say they were a little bit further back on the track. That would have indicated they had all the crossings together, but I don't know for sure. I was still hoping and praying that there was nothing wrong, that everybody was fine.

Q. All right, Aaron. Well, thank you for being honest with your questions. And I just want to, I want to move into -- well, first let me ask your representative if there's any clarifications or anything that need to be made because I'm done asking about the incident.

MR. SCHULZE: I have none.

MR. FRIGO: Okay.

MR. SCHULZE: No.

BY MR. FRIGO:

Q. I just -- if we can talk a little bit about how you develop your test plans, and how many you do a year, what the frequency is. If we could -- if you could tell me a little bit about that, that would be helpful.

A. Sure. So we had actually, we had done a -- we typically,

when we make our test plans, we obviously pick a -- what I would call a convenient location. We always take that into consideration depending on the type of test we're doing. It obviously depends on what type of equipment is there. Do we use equipment that's stored? Do we use equipment that may be in the yard there? But we -- we'll typically lay the plan out with GE, is who we do a lot of our testing with.

But it's several weeks, several months in advance. We coordinate with the locals there on-site to ensure that what the best way to do it is, and get their input and their feedback as to how to be as less -- as little disruptive as possible to the division and their operations so that we can adequately get our testing done. We try to be as least intrusive as possible to all the considerations around that.

But, again, it's a matter of us corresponding through whether it be telephones or emails as to what the best way is to accomplish a test previous to our showing up. So obviously, we can have everything laid out that we think is possible to be able to pull the test off as seamless as possible with causing the least amount of disruptions. But it's -- we like to have our plans down and pat so we can go in there and be successful and add a lot of value in as little time as possible.

Q. How many tests -- I mean, what would you say you do in a year?

A. I would say depending on what the -- depending on what it is,

we've -- for example, I mean, Trip Optimizer, our energy management program, we would probably do two or three tests, two or three, maybe, just depending on what is needing to be done. But I'd say a typical year we probably do four or five tests when we're developing software. And maybe if it's, you know, if it's stagnant, we'll probably do two or three a year.

Q. Can you recall in any -- let's say in the past year, if you've ever had to coordinate with another department such as maintenance-of-way in order to perform one of your tests?

A. No. No, we have not.

MR. FRIGO: Okay. Well, Aaron, I just I want thank you for taking the time to answer my questions, and to help me understand a little bit more about the events that happened in Edgemont. Before I wrap up, I just -- I'll ask your representative if there's any other clarifications that you feel should be made?

BY MR. SCHULZE:

Q. Yeah. This is Mark. One right there at the end, the -- are there any other coordinating departments -- not with maintenance-of-way, but would there ever have been with mechanical?

A. With mechanical, yes.

Q. Okay.

A. But maintenance-of-way no. If we -- no. It would be mechanical would probably be our other department that we would coordinate with, you know, blue flag protection and whatnot.

MR. FRIGO: And let's use that -- thank you, Mark. Let's use

that example with mechanical.

MR. RATLEDGE: I'm glad you mentioned that, yeah.

BY MR. FRIGO:

Q. Would that be included in your test plan?

A. I'm not going to say it would be up front, but as we got closer to the time that we would show up, our local representatives would coordinate that with mechanical if we needed them on-site the day of to provide that blue flag protection, and so on and so forth.

Q. Okay. And how can I best understand -- and let's use that scenario when mechanical would show up. Would you guys have a briefing all together?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay.

A. Yes.

Q. Well, Aaron, are there any questions that you think I should have asked you or is there anything else that you want to add?

A. No. I can't think of any.

MR. FRIGO: Well, and if you do, you have my card. You can always call me and -- but I again thank you for, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. And with that, I'll go off the record.

MR. RATLEDGE: You're very welcome.

MR. FRIGO: Thank you.

(Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF:	BNSF RAILWAY ROADWAY WORKER FATALITIES IN EDGEMONT, SOUTH DAKOTA ON JANUARY 17, 2017 Interview of Aaron Ratledge
ACCIDENT NUMBER:	DCA17FR004
PLACE:	Haslet, Texas
DATE:	January 20, 2017

was held according to the record, and that this is the original, complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed to the best of my skill and ability.

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Katherine Motley
Transcriber