

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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BNSF RAILWAY ROADWAY WORKER
FATALITIES IN EDMONTON, SOUTH
DAKOTA ON JANUARY 17, 2017

Accident No.: DCA17FR004

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Interview of: WILLIAM ROBERTS

Hot Springs, South Dakota

Thursday,
January 19, 2017

APPEARANCES:

RYAN FRIGO, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

JOHN MARK JONES, Director of Train Handling
BNSF Railway

RAY LINDSEY, Operating Practices
Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

DANIEL KENNER, Safety Task Force
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)

JAMES CHASE, National Safety Team
SMART Transportation

JEFFREY REETZ, Local Chairman
SMART TD, Edgemont 375.
(On behalf of Mr. Roberts)

I N D E X

ITEM

PAGE

Interview of William Roberts:

By Mr. Frigo

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I N T E R V I E W

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2 MR. FRIGO: My name is Ryan Frigo, and I am the Operations
3 Group Chairman for NTSB on this accident. We are here today on
4 January 19, 2017, in Hot Springs, South Dakota, to conduct an
5 interview with William Roberts, who works for BNSF. This
6 interview is in conjunction with NTSB's investigation of two
7 roadway worker fatalities in Edgemont, South Dakota, on 1/17/17.
8 The NTSB accident reference number is DCA17FR004.

9 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
10 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,
11 and please identify who you are representing and your title. I
12 would remind everybody to speak clearly so we can get an accurate
13 recording. I'll lead off and then pass to my right.

14 Again, my name is Ryan Frigo. The spelling of my last name
15 is F-r-i-g-o. I am the Operations Group Chairman for NTSB on this
16 accident.

17 MR. KENNER: My is Dan Kenner, K-e-n-n-e-r. I'm a member of
18 the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, Safety Task
19 Force.

20 MR. CHASE: Jim Chase, C-h-a-s-e, with SMART Transportation,
21 Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, Transportation
22 Division, and I'm on the National Safety Team.

23 MR. JONES: I'm John Mark Jones, J-o-n-e-s, director of train
24 handling with BNSF Railway out of Fort Worth, Texas.

25 MR. LINDSEY: Ray Lindsey, L-i-n-d-s-e-y. I'm operating

1 practices with the FRA.

2 MR. ROBERTS: I'm William Roberts, R-o-b-e-r-t-s. I'm a
3 conductor with BNSF Railway.

4 MR. REETZ: I'm Jeff --

5 MR. FRIGO: And William, do you wish to have a representative
6 with you here today?

7 MR. ROBERTS: Yes.

8 MR. REETZ: Jeff Reetz, Local Chairman for SMART TD, Edgemont
9 375. I'm here representing Will.

10 MR. FRIGO: And, William, are you okay if we go on a first-
11 name basis?

12 MR. ROBERTS: Yes.

13 MR. FRIGO: Is Will okay?

14 MR. ROBERTS: Will is what I go by, yeah.

15 MR. FRIGO: Okay, Will, thank you. And do we have your
16 permission to record our discussion with you today?

17 MR. ROBERTS: Yes.

18 MR. FRIGO: Okay. Thank you.

19 And the NTSB, we do fact finding. We do not assess blame.
20 We cannot offer any guarantee of -- against any certificate or
21 legal action. And a copy of this transcript will be placed in the
22 public docket.

23 INTERVIEW OF WILLIAM ROBERTS

24 BY MR. FRIGO:

1 Q. Will, I just want to thank you for coming in here and talking
2 to us today. I think the best way maybe to proceed, we talked a
3 little beforehand, and if you could just walk us through when you
4 called on that morning, and tell us about your day.

5 A. Okay. Well, I was on duty, I believe, at 9:15 in the
6 morning, so I would have gotten my call at 6:45. We have an hour
7 and a half call. And that's when I would have woke up. From
8 there, I did my normal routine, got ready, got coffee going, got
9 all my gear for work, headed out the door. I live in Hot Springs.
10 It's about 25-minute commute or so, so I leave a little bit early.

11 And arrive down the depot just like any other day, and
12 noticed my train was still on its way, still wasn't quite down to
13 the area where we swap out. We swap out at the East Crossing, so
14 we don't do a depot swap technically. We take a yard van out and
15 swap out there.

16 So we waited around for a little while for that and got our
17 paperwork together. I was aware there was a crew working on the
18 Deadwood Y, and they were testing some cars or something, was
19 going on, out on that area. So we kind of had an idea that there
20 was some stuff going out there just from chat in the depot.

21 From there we had radio contact from our train, said they
22 were ready for us. So we got in the yard van, headed down to the
23 crossing, and at that point we swapped with the crew.

24 From there, we were sitting at an approach, was our signal,
25 and we want to wait to have at least an approach medium or more to

1 pull from there so we're not blocking anything. So we sat and
2 waited, and my engineer, Tyler Bilbruck, he made contact with the
3 crew ahead of us. We knew they were most likely stopped at 78 --
4 478, just based on the signal sequence. He contacted them, and in
5 fact they were stopped there at a red signal. Listened to the
6 radio communication, and it looked like they were going to talk
7 the train -- or, sorry, that happened a little bit later.

8 So anyways, we got a flasher at that point, and we heard the
9 dispatcher give eastbound train permission to take 478 signal.
10 They got talked by it. So they were going from Main 1 to Main 2,
11 and so we knew that was going on ahead of us. And that point we
12 knew Jim had to have been past 478 because they were getting
13 talked by.

14 So we proceeded to go ahead on our approach medium signal.
15 Went by the depot. I remember seeing a road foreman of engines in
16 a vehicle off at the crossing. It would be called the West
17 Crossing. He was stopped at that crossing. And Tyler Bilbruck,
18 the engineer, contacted the crew who was working on the Deadwood Y
19 because they were instructed to wait for us to clear by, I
20 believe, and let them know, hey, I'm not sure if you can see us
21 from back there, but this is our locomotive number; we're coming
22 by you right now, that's us.

23 We just started around the corner. At that point we could
24 see just the back side of the maintenance-of-way truck. It's a
25 rather large truck. So we began blowing our whistle as standard

1 procedure for men and equipment on the right-of-way. Then, as we
2 started to come further, we noticed there was men in the track.
3 Again, started really whistling. I noticed there was two men,
4 backs to us. They weren't looking at us. And a third gentleman
5 as well on the outside of the rail. And just kept whistling,
6 whistling. At the point I realized they weren't hearing us, I
7 plugged the train, I put it in emergency. And from there, it does
8 get rather blurry. I do remember one of the gentlemen noticing us
9 just before we lost visual of him, and he attempted to jump out of
10 the way. The other gentleman, I don't think he ever turned
11 around. And I don't know what happened to the third guy. I
12 believe he's okay.

13 And so we got stopped. Well, first, I called out on the
14 radio my emergency to let everybody know what just had happened,
15 and I instructed Tyler, I just said, call 911 now, and I headed
16 straight out the back door. My first thought was providing any
17 first aid I could for anybody. Because as I said, I did see one
18 gentleman, it looked like he was trying to jump. I didn't know
19 his condition.

20 Upon my way working back from the locomotive was rather deep
21 snow so I wasn't very fast moving. But a couple cars back I
22 noticed a gentleman underneath one of the cars in between the
23 rail, and he wasn't in good shape at all, and his shirt was kind
24 of pulled up on him so I could see his stomach area. And I sat
25 with him for a second and called out for him, and he didn't

1 respond. And I noticed his stomach wasn't moving. He wasn't
2 breathing is what I assessed from it.

3 And so from there, I just continued on because I just wanted
4 to see if the other gentleman was okay. I came up to the truck,
5 and the third gentleman -- I assume that's who he was, was already
6 in the cab of the truck. He was having trouble contacting 91- --
7 couldn't get the radio to work 911, so I tried to help him with
8 that, and asked him if he was okay. And he was really out of it.
9 That's the only way I could describe it. He just couldn't really
10 focus, and I was having a hard time myself. And I then began to
11 work back to look for the third gentleman, and I noticed a lot of
12 debris. Looked to be a snow blower, like a leaf blower, what they
13 use to blow out the switches. There was one of those, and it was
14 in a lot of pieces, and I could see the other gentleman face down
15 in a snow bank.

16 Just at that same time, a jeep truck pulled up, and that had
17 Shad Sowers, and Jim Korecky, and one other gentleman. That was
18 my trainmaster and road foreman. They came out, and they got to
19 the third gentleman first, and rolled him over. I noticed they
20 checked for pulse, and they were -- everybody just kind of went
21 from there. And I walked them back to try to find the other
22 gentleman underneath the train and they thought it would be best
23 if I just got back on the locomotive.

24 And from there, we waited I'm not sure how long. It was some
25 time before we were then taken off the train, and then we were

1 brought back to the depot and did some basic follow-up
2 questioning. Met with the coroner and BNSF police officer as well
3 as some BNSF officials. And that was pretty much the summary of
4 the day.

5 Q. Will, I know that was difficult to go through that, but thank
6 you. Thank you for the information. I know that it's very
7 helpful to us what you shared with us. I just, I want to ask you
8 a few follow-up questions on what you can remember. Do you
9 remember approximately how long you guys sat at that signal
10 waiting for the medium approach?

11 A. I can't tell you an exact time, no.

12 Q. Okay. Do you recall any other train movements as you guys
13 were -- after you departed the depot? And was there anything
14 going on, on Main 2?

15 A. That's something I've gone over in my head. It seems like I
16 picture another train being on Main 2. But now everything has
17 become so blurry at this point, I can't definitely answer that
18 question.

19 Q. And that's okay, Will. That's okay. You mentioned that you
20 when you first saw the two with their back to you, do you remember
21 seeing any tools or anything else? Can you remember anything
22 else?

23 A. Yeah. One of the gentlemen did have the snow blower in his
24 hand, and I believe one of them may have had a switch broom or
25 something. He had -- it looked like he was doing something, but

1 his back was to us so I'm not sure what he had in his hands or
2 anything like that.

3 Q. Will, what about that third guy? Do you remember if that
4 third guy had anything, the one on the outside of the rail?

5 A. I can't say. I just know they were all looking at one area,
6 I believe, at the points of the switch, and -- I mean, it really
7 happened very fast. I can't even describe how fast it happened.
8 Yeah, that's the best I can say is -- I remember one having one of
9 the snow blowers, the leaf blowing things in his hands.

10 Q. Will, thank you.

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. Just to clarify one thing. I think I heard you say that you
13 plugged it?

14 A. Yes.

15 MR. FRIGO: Okay. I don't have any other questions at this
16 time.

17 MR. KENNER: I don't have any questions at this time.

18 MR. CHASE: I don't either.

19 MR. JONES: I don't have any questions, Will.

20 MR. LINDSEY: I don't have any questions either.

21 BY MR. FRIGO:

22 Q. Okay, Tyler, I'm just going to ask you a few --

23 A. Will.

24 Q. Will. I'm sorry.

25 A. You're okay.

1 Q. Will. Sorry about that.

2 A. No, you're okay.

3 Q. I'm going to -- I wrote it down on this piece of paper too,
4 but I apologize.

5 A. No problem.

6 Q. So, Will, I just have a few follow-up questions, and it's
7 stuff that we ask everybody we talk to. Do you remember prior to
8 that day when the last time you worked?

9 A. Yeah. It would have been -- because I just came off of a
10 layoff, so I had several days off. I think it would have been
11 Thursday or Friday, so --

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. Yeah.

14 Q. One thing I could do is I could send you a questionnaire --

15 A. Okay.

16 Q. -- that kind of talks about your sleep history the 72 hours
17 prior to the accident, when you were resting, when you were awake,
18 you know, did you eat, were you feeling okay.

19 A. Okay. Yeah.

20 Q. I don't know if you can remember some of that stuff right
21 now, but --

22 A. Yeah. I was sleeping normal nights. I mean, like I said, I
23 was -- I took a layoff so I was on like what you would call a
24 normal person's schedule instead of being on call. I was sleeping
25 through the nights. Like the -- for instance, the night before I

1 went to sleep around 9:00 at night and I slept all the way until I
2 got my call, which would have been 6:45 in the morning. So I got
3 a good night's sleep.

4 Q. Good rest.

5 A. Yeah. It was a good night.

6 Q. What about your activities when you were off the few days
7 before? Were you local? Did you go anywhere or --

8 A. Just to the gym. I just -- I work out locally, but other
9 than that -- I just recently got engaged, so we've been kind of
10 spending time together with each other, so --

11 Q. How's your overall health?

12 A. I think I'm pretty healthy, yeah.

13 Q. Go to the doctor every year or --

14 A. Yeah. I get regular checkups, and I stay physically active
15 and I eat as good as I can. I try to do that.

16 Q. What about vision, your hearing, everything?

17 A. Yeah, I have good vision. I actually just had my annual
18 hearing conservation, and I was told it was very good, so --

19 Q. Good. Good. And when you do get that yearly physical, is
20 that something from the railroad or is that something you do on
21 your own?

22 A. I just go to my family doctor, private doctor.

23 Q. You taking any medications right now?

24 A. No.

25 Q. Prescriptions, over-the-counter?

1 A. No.

2 Q. Okay. And now -- and I did ask Tyler this same question, so,
3 Will, I'm going to ask you. Do you know what the term fitness for
4 duty means?

5 A. I believe so.

6 Q. Okay. What do you think it means?

7 A. Being prepared both mentally and physically to do your job.
8 I would say that.

9 Q. That's a pretty accurate answer there. And can you recall in
10 your training or anything at the railroad were you ever trained in
11 how to assess another employee for their fitness for duty?

12 A. I mean, I'm sure -- yeah. I'm sure we talked about that in
13 conductor class, looking for signs if somebody might be under an
14 influence of something or maybe too tired, something like that.
15 It was definitely a conversation we had.

16 Q. Okay. Thank you for that. And if you could just give me a
17 little history about your time on the railroad --

18 A. Okay.

19 Q. -- when you started, and a little bit about that?

20 A. Yeah. The 27th will be 3 years for me on the railroad. I
21 was furloughed for a brief time. I was able to work as a clerk
22 for the railroad as well. They offered temporary furlough jobs
23 for employees. So I was able to do that, so I wasn't furloughed
24 very long. I did spend a couple of months furloughed.

25 Q. Okay. So but -- so you were a conductor?

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. Came on as a conductor?

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. And then went through training to be a conductor?

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. And then during a brief period you were a clerk?

7 A. Yeah.

8 Q. And then went back to --

9 A. The craft, yeah.

10 Q. Back to the craft.

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. And in this job you're working, are you on the extra board or
13 is it a --

14 A. I'm on the pool.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Yeah.

17 MR. FRIGO: Will, thank you.

18 See if anybody else in the room has any further questions.

19 MR. KENNER: None for me, Will. Thank you.

20 MR. CHASE: None for me either.

21 MR. JONES: None for me.

22 MR. LINDSEY: No further questions.

23 MR. FRIGO: Will, I just want to thank you again for coming
24 in and talking to us today and helping us understand a little bit
25 more about what happened out there. And I'll ask you one final

1 question. Is there anything that you want to add? Is there
2 anything that maybe we didn't ask you that you want to tell us
3 about, about that day or in general?

4 MR. ROBERTS: Nothing particularly. I think you guys covered
5 everything.

6 MR. FRIGO: Okay. Will, thanks again. And at this time
7 we'll go off the record.

8 MR. ROBERTS: Okay. Thanks.

9 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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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 William Roberts

ACCIDENT NUMBER: DCA17FR004

PLACE: Hot Springs, South Dakota

DATE: January 19, 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.

Katherine Motley
Transcriber