

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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BNSF RAILWAY ROADWAY WORKER

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FATALITIES IN EDMONT, SOUTH

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Accident No.: DCA17FR004

DAKOTA ON JANUARY 17, 2017

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Interview of: MICHAEL SMELTZER

Saturday,
January 21, 2017

APPEARANCES:

CY GURA, Rail Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

ADAM MILLER, General Director, Maintenance
BNSF Railway

RAY LINDSEY, Operating Practices
Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

CRAIG CLARKE, Track Safety Inspector
FRA Region 8

GEORGE LOVELAND, Vice General Chairperson
Burlington System Division
Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE)

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By Mr. Clarke		10

I N T E R V I E W

(1:00 p.m.)

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3 MR. GURA: My name is Cy, C-y, Gura, and this interview is
4 being conducted on January 21st, 2017 at approximately 1 p.m. with
5 witness Michael Smeltzer in regard with the accident that occurred
6 on January 17th, 2017, at 10:09 Mountain Standard Time, near
7 Edgemont, South Dakota.

8 The purpose of the investigation is to increase safety, not
9 to assign fault, blame or liability. The NTSB cannot offer any
10 guarantee of confidentiality or immunity from legal or certificate
11 actions. A transcript or summary of the interview will go into
12 the public docket. And the interviewee can have representative of
13 their choice.

14 Michael, do you have a representative of your choice with
15 you?

16 MR. SMELTZER: No, not currently, but I did talk to a union
17 representative yesterday.

18 MR. GURA: Oh, okay. And you do not need one presently at
19 this time?

20 MR. SMELTZER: No, sir.

21 MR. GURA: Okay. Thank you.

22 At the table, I'm going to have the other guys introduce
23 themselves and spell their last name. And I will start with you,
24 Michael. Would you please introduce yourself, what you did on the
25 day of the accident, what position you held, and spell your last

1 name. So please go ahead.

2 MR. SMELTZER: My name's Michael Smeltzer, last name spelling
3 is S-m-e-l-t-z-e-r.

4 MR. GURA: And your position with the BNSF that day?

5 MR. SMELTZER: I was marked up as a conductor. That day I
6 was called as a foreman on a yard job.

7 MR. GURA: Okay.

8 MR. MILLER: Adam Miller, M-i-l-l-e-r, General Director,
9 Maintenance, BNSF.

10 MR. LOVELAND: George Loveland, Brotherhood of Maintenance of
11 Way Employees, L-o-v-e-l-a-n-d.

12 MR. CLARKE: Craig Clarke, C-l-a-r-k-e. I'm with FRA Region
13 8, Track Safety Inspector.

14 MR. LINDSEY: Ray Lindsey, L-i-n-d-s-e-y, Operating
15 Practices, FRA.

16 INTERVIEW OF MICHAEL SMELTZER

17 BY MR. GURA:

18 Q. Okay, Michael, why don't you just tell me right about that
19 day, your day, how it started, and bring me right down to what you
20 did. Start from the beginning of your call, what time you got
21 called, and all the way up to time you guys got done working at
22 the Y.

23 A. My day began, I believe I was called at 04:55 on the 17th for
24 on duty at 05:35. I believe I had a late call because they were
25 having trouble getting the position filled for the day. I was

1 given my full hour and a half to report for duty.

2 When I arrived at the depot, I awaited the arrival of the
3 other crew members, the engineer and the helper on the job for
4 that day. They had both received later calls, too, so they had to
5 take some time to get there. I was a lot closer to the depot than
6 they were.

7 Once they were there, we briefed with Trainmaster Jim Korecky
8 as far as what we were going to do that day. We were instructed
9 to take two light power units off of track 510 in the Edgemont
10 Yard. One was going to be the head end power for the train that
11 we were building and one would be the distributed power, rear-end
12 unit, for the train we were building.

13 Once clearing all the switches that we needed to be cleared
14 in the yard to make our move out, we left what would be our DP
15 unit in the yard and came out one single engine, light power. We
16 got authority from the dispatcher to enter main track 1, and
17 proceed west to go to the Deadwood Y and do our work.

18 Once we got out on the main line, we went to the west switch
19 of the Deadwood Y, which, to my knowledge, had not been opened in
20 close to a year. We'd had a lot of weather out there lately, snow
21 and ice, and a few days leading up to the 17th it had gotten warm.
22 So during the day everything would melt and then at night it would
23 re-freeze. So that west Y switch took some work to get it open.

24 Myself and the helper on the job, Randy Dixon, utilized
25 shovels, brooms, switch picks -- or, sorry -- ice picks that are

1 attached to the end of the switch brooms to sweep away the debris,
2 chip away ice, remove anything that would have stopped the switch
3 from opening properly. After -- I couldn't put an exact time on
4 it. I would estimate roughly 45 minutes we spent working on the
5 switch just to make sure everything was clear and it would
6 function properly. We were able to get the switch open with no
7 assistance from anybody else.

8 We took our single light unit back into the Deadwood Y
9 through the west switch. Once the light power unit was in and
10 clear, we closed the switch, locked the switch, and released the
11 switch and the main line back to the dispatcher.

12 Once we were inside, our instructions were to gather up 103
13 autorack cars that were left in the Deadwood Y, gather them up,
14 make sure that -- do a visual inspection, make sure that we had
15 air charged to all the brakes on the train.

16 The 103 cars were cut into 3 sections to clear crossings
17 through there. Two were private crossings; one was a county road.
18 The first two were no issue. The third one, which was the county
19 road, it appeared that somebody had graded the road, whether,
20 either a frontend loader or an actual grader, but when they graded
21 the road, all the snow and debris that they graded up, they had
22 left a large amount of it right on top of the rails on the
23 Deadwood Y there, between the second and third section of cars
24 that we had to put together.

25 Due to the amount that was there, I believe it was the

1 section crew, maintenance of way was called out to help us clear
2 it. Shovels weren't going to cut it, so they brought out a
3 frontend loader, cleared off the crossing with the frontend
4 loader, and then myself, Mr. Korecky, Mr. Sowers, and three
5 members of the section crew used shovels and brooms to clear out
6 the rails so that we knew the cars would seat when we were shoving
7 them back to make the joint.

8 Once that was -- once we confirmed that it was clear and the
9 track was in good enough shape for us to do the remainder of our
10 work, the section crew left. I didn't have much conversation with
11 them at all. By the time -- I was walking the train that we were
12 working on to do a visual inspection and make sure everything was
13 okay to take it out on the main line. By the time I got back to
14 that particular crossing, the work was pretty much completed, so I
15 didn't have a whole lot of interaction with anybody back there at
16 that time.

17 Q. Okay. You mentioned that the section was called? Who called
18 the section, or were they already on their way there?

19 A. I do not know who called them. They were already there when
20 I got back to that crossing.

21 Q. Okay. And during the limited conversation you had with them,
22 did you or the trainmaster or the road foreman mention that you
23 guys had a hard time with that switch, to go up there and make
24 sure it cleaned? Because I'm trying to figure out how they
25 decided to go over there. So I was just wondering if, you know,

1 someone, just through casual conversation, said it was really
2 hard, and they were going to go up there and check out the work.
3 Or, you know, they were instructed to go out there and clean the
4 switch out for future use, because you still had to go back in and
5 out a couple times.

6 A. Yeah. Personally I did not say anything to anybody there
7 about it. I did not hear anybody else that was there say anything
8 about it at the time. And my -- the helper on the job that day,
9 Mr. Randy Dixon, he was on the head end of our train the entire
10 time. He didn't have any contact with anybody as far as that,
11 that I know of. If he -- if anything was said on the radio, I
12 didn't hear it.

13 When we originally started working on the switch, about the
14 time we were done working and got the switch open and closed, I
15 believe it was Mr. Erickson that arrived, and he was there when we
16 got the switch open and closed.

17 Q. Okay. And who is Mr. Erickson?

18 A. I'm not entirely sure. I believe he is -- he is in
19 management for BNSF out of Gillette, I believe. I'm not 100
20 percent certain on that. That's the first time that I had ever
21 met him.

22 Q. Okay. Well, that's good to know, because at least he was
23 there in observation. Did he ask you what was taking so long or
24 something of that nature?

25 A. No, sir. He asked if we needed any help, and at that time we

1 were done and we told him, no, thank you, and we got it opened,
2 got it closed, and got in out of the clear so that they could
3 resume normal traffic on the main line.

4 Q. Okay. And that was the extent? He didn't have anything much
5 more to say, then, and --

6 A. No, sir.

7 Q. Did you see him after that anywhere?

8 A. I believe he was at the scene after the incident occurred,
9 but I'm not 100 percent sure about that either.

10 Q. Oh, okay.

11 MR. GURA: Well, I have no further questions. I'm going to
12 pass it around the room here to see if anybody else had any
13 questions.

14 MR. MILLER: Adam Miller. No questions.

15 MR. LOVELAND: George Loveland. No questions.

16 MR. CLARKE: Clarke, with FRA Track.

17 BY MR. CLARKE:

18 Q. Michael, I -- when you were done cleaning the switch on the
19 main track 1 into the Deadwood Y, and you, after you --

20 A. Yes, sir.

21 Q. -- after you pulled your locomotive in the clear and re-lined
22 the switch for main track 1, did you have to re-clean the switch
23 or do any additional work on that to get it lined properly for the
24 main track?

25 A. To line it back to main track use? No, we didn't have to

1 clean anything else out. We did inspect it, and made sure nothing
2 looked like it was damaged or bent, and there was no debris in the
3 way to keep it from opening again, and everything looked fine as
4 far as we could tell.

5 Q. Okay. Thank you.

6 A. You're welcome.

7 MR. LINDSEY: Ray Lindsey. No questions.

8 MR. GURA: Do you have anything else to add, Michael, that
9 you -- after you said your story, that you can think of? I mean,
10 you know, you were there, you're the one that's giving us the
11 great information, and I really appreciate it.

12 MR. SMELTZER: No, sir. Nothing to add, except that if
13 anybody has any questions for me, I am available all times.
14 Mr. Sowers has all of my contact phone numbers, so if anybody ever
15 has any questions for me, I am available at any time to answer
16 anything.

17 MR. GURA: Okay, Michael. I really appreciate your time,
18 taking your time to talk to us on your time off. So, again, thank
19 you very much.

20 MR. SMELTZER: All right. Thank you, sir. Anything I can do
21 to help in any way.

22 MR. GURA: All right. Thank you now. Bye bye.

23 MR. SMELTZER: Thank you. Bye.

24 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

25

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 Michael Smeltzer

ACCIDENT NUMBER: DCA17FR004

PLACE:

DATE: January 21, 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.

Karen Coen Brooks
Transcriber