

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION &
FIRE NEAR WEST READING,
PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023

Accident No.: PLD23LR002

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Interview of: STEPHAN SASSAMAN, Maintenance Supervisor
RM Palmer

Wyomissing, Pennsylvania

Thursday,
April 21, 2023

APPEARANCES:

SARA LYONS, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

LOGAN SMITH, Party Coordinator
R.M. Palmer

GARY BAUMAN, Instructor
Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration

KIM WEST, Investigator in Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

CHRIS WHITEASH, Investigator
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission

I N D E X

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Interview of Stephan Sassaman:	
By Ms. Lyons	5
By Mr. Smith	19
By Mr. Bauman	20
By Ms. West	23
By Mr. Whiteash	27
By Ms. Lyons	29
By Mr. Bauman	34
By Ms. West	35
By Mr. Whiteash	38
By Ms. Lyons	39

I N T E R V I E W

(9:04 a.m.)

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2
3 MS. LYONS: Good morning. Today is April 21st, 2023. It's
4 now 9:04 a.m. eastern time. My name is Sara Lyons and I'm the
5 National Transportation Safety Board's pipeline operations and
6 integrity management group chair for this accident. We're holding
7 this interview at the Residence Inn in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania.
8 The interview is being conducted as part of the investigation into
9 the explosion that occurred on March 24th, 2023 in West Reading,
10 Pennsylvania. The NTSB case number for this accident is
11 PLD23LR002. This interview is being recorded and may be
12 transcribed at a later date. A copy of the transcript will be
13 provided to you for review prior to being entered into the public
14 docket. You're permitted to have one other person present during
15 the interview. This is a person of your choice. It can be an
16 attorney, spouse, supervisor, friend, family member or no one at
17 all. Please state for the record who you've selected or that
18 you've selected --

19 MR. SASSAMAN: No one at all.

20 MS. LYONS: For the record, please state the spelling of your
21 full name and your job title when you were at Palmer (ph.).

22 MR. SASSAMAN: Stephan Sassaman, S-t-e-p-h-a-n, S-a-s-s-a-m-
23 a-n. My last job position before I retired was maintenance
24 supervisor.

25 MS. LYONS: And for today, should we call you Stephan or

1 Steve?

2 MR. SASSAMAN: Steve.

3 MS. LYONS: Steve.

4 MR. SASSAMAN: Steve is what I go by.

5 MS. LYONS: Okay. Now, I'd like to go around the room and
6 have each person state their name with spelling, title and the
7 agency or organization you're representing. I'll begin and then
8 we'll go around the room starting with the person on my left. So,
9 my name is Sara Lyons, S-a-r-a, L-y-o-n-s. I'm a pipeline
10 accident investigator with the NTSB.

11 MR. SMITH: Logan Smith, L-o-g-a-n, S-m-i-t-h. R.M. Palmer,
12 party coordinator.

13 MR. BAUMAN: Hi. Good morning. I'm Gary Bauman, G-a-r-y, B-
14 a-u-m-a-n, and I'm with the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials
15 Safety Administration.

16 MS. WEST: Good morning. My name is Kim West. That's K-i-m,
17 W-e-s-t. I'm the investigator in charge for the NTSB.

18 MR. WHITEASH: Okay. Chris Whiteash. That's C-h-r-i-s, W-h-
19 i-t-e-a-s-h. I'm a gas safety investigator for the Pennsylvania
20 Public Utility Commission.

21 MS. LYONS: So, with that, we'll go ahead and get started
22 with the interview today, Steve.

23 INTERVIEW OF STEPHAN SASSAMAN

24 BY MS. LYONS:

25 Q. So, if you can, start out by giving us a summary of your

1 education and experience of your time with Palmer and your
2 position and your like progression through, through the work
3 there.

4 A. Education-wise, just the normal 12 grades. I didn't go to
5 college or anything. Started at Palmer's right out of high
6 school. They were looking for an electrical background. I had
7 gone through the votech (ph.) schools for electrical. I started
8 there in '74 and left May of last year. So, I was there for 48
9 years.

10 Q. So, what year did you start?

11 A. I started in '74.

12 Q. '74.

13 A. Started as just a mechanic and slowly worked my way up.

14 Q. To maintenance supervisor. So, what were your
15 responsibilities in that role that you had?

16 A. Scheduling the maintenance guys, keeping track of work
17 orders, things like that. Ordering parts. Had a group of ten or
18 12 guys.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. Responsible for all the maintenance in building one and two.

21 Q. So, is that for the factory operations or did you also have
22 responsibility for like gas appliances for any interactions with
23 the utility --

24 A. Pretty much all of the above.

25 Q. Okay. Great. So, I was wondering if you could describe in

1 your time there with Palmer, which was pretty extensive, if you
2 had any knowledge of natural gas leaks that occurred in the past?

3 A. Not in building two. Building one, there's a boiler house
4 behind the building. We had a gas leak there. I don't know what
5 year or what date. But they ended up, UGI (ph.) came in and
6 replaced the meter and all the piping.

7 Q. Okay. Do you recall if that was the, I think that's the
8 building we're calling building three.

9 A. Building three is --

10 Q. But --

11 A. -- Wyomissing.

12 Q. Okay, okay. So, the boiler house has an outside natural --

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. -- gas meter. Is that where the leak was or was it within --

15 A. Yes. No. It was outside.

16 Q. It was outside. Okay. And that's the only one that you're
17 aware of?

18 A. Yes. That's the leak that I was ever aware of.

19 Q. No interior natural gas leaks that you know of.

20 A. No. I know UGI had scheduled a complimentary safety check
21 where they came in to the different buildings and ran their
22 equipment around checking for leaks. I don't know that they ever
23 found any. I'm not sure why the meter for building two was
24 relocated. I vaguely remember that.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. For me, it was a nonevent. I mean, I talked to UGI. They
2 explained what they were going to do. I told them have at it.
3 Here's my cell phone number. If you need anything at all, call
4 me. And they did the whole job and moved on to the next thing.

5 Q. Okay, okay. Great. So, UGI did complimentary checks of
6 their assets in the basement of building two. Was that a periodic
7 thing or --

8 A. They only did it once in the time I was there and that was, I
9 don't know, maybe five or six years that I was in that building.

10 Q. Okay, okay. Just one follow up from before. So, how long,
11 when did you start as the maintenance supervisor? It's okay if
12 you don't remember.

13 A. I'm terrible with dates.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. It was five or six years in building one, building one and
16 two. I had originally started in building one. After about 20
17 years, I went to building three. After another 20 some years, I
18 went back to building one and then that's where I retired from.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. So, I was back and forth, back and forth.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. Wherever they needed my talent.

23 Q. So, are you familiar, well, what gas appliances that you're
24 aware of were in buildings one and two?

25 A. Building one was the large boiler in what we called the

1 boiler house. That was a separate building behind the main
2 building. There was a gas heater in the chocolate room in
3 building one. That was in the basement. Building two had one,
4 one room air, room heater and one hot water heater.

5 Q. Where were those?

6 A. What was that?

7 Q. Which floor were those on?

8 A. They were in the basement of building two.

9 Q. Okay. Is that it?

10 A. That's all I can think of.

11 Q. Okay. All right. So, underneath Cherry Street, there's
12 some, some private assets that are associated with the Palmer
13 building, running between building one and two. Are you familiar
14 with that?

15 A. There are some pipes underground. Yes.

16 Q. Yes.

17 A. There's chocolate pipes and steam pipes.

18 Q. Do you know, let me get a photo real quick. So, so, this is
19 just a basic photo from Google of the two buildings, of building
20 two. And this an aerial view of the same. So, building one here.
21 Building two here. Cherry Street is right here. You see a truck
22 it looks like there. And Second Avenue, it's here. So, about
23 where are there underground, any underground facilities that
24 you --

25 A. Connecting between the buildings would be here.

- 1 Q. Do you mind drawing it on there?
- 2 A. As a matter of fact, right about there is where the gas meter
3 is or was. And the pipes were pretty close to that, down a little
4 farther. Let's see if we can pick it out here. Okay. So, that's
5 the railroad tracks. This --
- 6 Q. So, this is Cherry Street. This is building one here.
- 7 A. Okay, okay.
- 8 Q. And this is building two here. And it's --
- 9 A. Okay. So, the boiler house was probably right here.
- 10 Q. If this is building one, is this the boiler house that you're
11 referring to?
- 12 A. Yes. I'm getting turned around here.
- 13 Q. That's okay.
- 14 A. Yes. That would be the boiler house.
- 15 Q. Okay.
- 16 A. So, the pipes, so, this is building two?
- 17 Q. That's building one. This is building two.
- 18 A. Okay. So, the pipes across would be right about here. Like
19 I said there were two or three chocolate pipes we'd pump from the
20 tanks in building two's basement over into building one.
- 21 Q. Okay.
- 22 A. And there was a steam pipe.
- 23 Q. What's the steam pipe for?
- 24 A. Heating, heating room, heating. In building two, they just
25 used it to heat the room.

- 1 Q. Is that like a steam radiant system?
- 2 A. It was a fan unit with a coil in it, a steam coil in it.
- 3 Q. Okay. In building two. And then what about in building one?
- 4 A. Building one had very little heat, mostly through the
- 5 offices. The production equipment gave off enough heat. It was
- 6 more air conditioning and keeping things cooler. Tried to keep it
- 7 about 68 degrees. Most of the time, we were cooling and not
- 8 heating.
- 9 Q. Okay.
- 10 A. The office spaces on the second floor in building one, that
- 11 had baseboard steam heating.
- 12 Q. Okay. All right. Perfect. So --
- 13 A. There's also a compressed air pipe that goes under the
- 14 street.
- 15 Q. Where about is that? Is it about --
- 16 A. Same spot where all the other ones were.
- 17 Q. The same spot.
- 18 A. Yes.
- 19 Q. Okay.
- 20 A. It was only, I don't know, inch, inch and half pipe. It
- 21 wasn't a large pipe.
- 22 Q. So, so, in that location, there is a steam pipe. There are
- 23 chocolate lines and there's compressed air.
- 24 A. Yes.
- 25 Q. Anything else that you're aware of?

1 A. And --

2 Q. Are there any other underground utilities that you're aware
3 of --

4 A. No.

5 Q. -- or any infrastructure? Do you know what the pressure of
6 that compressed air is?

7 A. Probably right around 100 PSI.

8 Q. Okay. And what is that used for?

9 A. For some of the production equipment.

10 Q. All right. In your time at R.M. Palmer, did you see any
11 schematic that shows where these facilities are?

12 A. Not that went to the detail of showing pipes. I think it
13 showed a bit more building. I'm sure there were marked some but
14 not real detailed.

15 Q. Okay. So, when you say building, are you talking about like
16 floor layouts?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. Okay. And then I know you mentioned the, the meter
19 relocation project. I would like to go back to that and try to go
20 through just, I know it was a couple years ago, as much as you
21 remember what your engagement with UGI was. If you could, walk us
22 through.

23 A. Very little with UGI. I don't recall why it was decided to
24 move the meter. I vaguely remember about that time. They were
25 putting the remote readers and stuff on the meters. So, that

1 might have been the reason. I do not remember why we moved it.
2 As far as my involvement with them, their people came in, you
3 know. We're going to do this. We're going to dig here. They had
4 it marked out with paint. And basically, there wasn't much for me
5 to do. They didn't need my help. So, I gave them my cell, my
6 work cell phone number. Said anything at all you need, call me.
7 And for me, it was just another day. I just moved on to the next
8 thing.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. I don't recall that anything came up that there were any
11 issues. And then they called me when they were done with the
12 project. The only thing we did is we put some bowlers (ph.) in
13 just to kind of protect the meter more.

14 Q. You, you initiated that?

15 A. Palmer did that.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. Yes. Actually (ph.) --

18 Q. Do you remember if that was by request or --

19 A. I had an outside contractor come in and do it.

20 Q. Do you remember if UGI suggested that or if --

21 A. Do I remember what?

22 Q. If UGI recommended doing that or was that just something that
23 Palmer --

24 A. I don't recall. I just remember that we put that in because
25 it was, that's a very small pavement there next to the building.

1 And with chocolate truck traffic, and a lot of times when there's
2 a chocolate truck, people try to squeeze through. So, we decided
3 it needed to be protected.

4 Q. Okay. (Indiscernible). Yes. So, here's a photo of that
5 protection that you're discussing.

6 A. Yes, yes. This framework is from when we were unloading a
7 tanker truck. They have to get up on top of the truck. So, the
8 top of this is a trolley with a fall protector. So, we just
9 mounted it off of that.

10 Q. Okay. So, in this area, where do they connect the chocolate
11 truck?

12 A. Down this way a little bit, there's an opening. There's a --

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. -- a hatch that the chocolate truck connects to.

15 Q. Excuse me. Okay.

16 A. On that picture, it's probably only another three or four
17 feet to where the hatch would be.

18 Q. And then how did they, so, they climb onto the chocolate
19 truck from here. But how does the fall protection attach? I
20 don't know if this, if this picture is going to be good enough.

21 A. They have a harness that they have to put on and then there's
22 a fall arrester with a hook. And they hook it on there.

23 Q. And then on, maybe you can see on here.

24 A. Yes. This is, this is where there's an I-beam. And the fall
25 arrester is on a trolley.

1 Q. On this beam here?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. Okay. Sorry. I'm just going to write down what you said on
4 here so I don't forget. Okay. And then so, somebody would be on
5 top of the chocolate truck, right, in that area.

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. All right. Good. So, in this photo, I don't have the date
8 on when this photo was taken but it appears to be not too long
9 after the meter relocation project. Did you see the excavation
10 that was done in this area?

11 A. I'm not sure what you mean.

12 Q. Like when they removed the road and dug down to do the work
13 that they were doing, did you --

14 A. I saw it. I don't know in detail. Again, I was letting UGI
15 do their thing. And I'm sure I walked out to check on them at
16 some point when this was dug up I'm sure. Nothing stood out to
17 me.

18 Q. Okay. So, you don't remember UGI calling or requesting
19 someone to come out and take a look at the excavation.

20 A. No. I'm sure that probably happened. I don't recall that.

21 Q. You don't recall that. Okay.

22 A. Unless it was something disastrous going, I just moved on to
23 the next thing. Keeping two buildings going kept me busy most
24 days.

25 Q. Okay, okay. Fair.

1 A. You know, unless it was something out of the ordinary, I just
2 don't recall it.

3 Q. So, our team is going to be working in this area in the next
4 few days. Do you, we were talking about potential locations where
5 the infrastructure crossed Cherry Street. Do you think it might
6 be in this area or do you not know?

7 A. It's, it's, it might be in this corner but it's right in this
8 area.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. Yes.

11 Q. Some, like that.

12 A. I'd say that covers it.

13 Q. All right. So, I just have a couple more questions and then
14 we'll move on. So, when you were working at Palmer, if you had, I
15 know you said you hadn't. But had you smelled natural gas in one
16 of the two buildings, would you have known what that smells like?

17 A. Yes, yes.

18 Q. What would have you done? What were the actions that you
19 would have taken?

20 A. I'd call UGI first. Try to pinpoint the leak and then decide
21 whether I need to bring in an outside contractor to do the work.
22 That's what we did when we had the boiler house leak.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. And that parking area in the back was mostly maintenance
25 people. And the boiler house leak, they had called me at home and

1 said they really smelled it strong. And that's when we called UGI
2 and I came back in that evening. UGI found a few small leaks and
3 then they came back. I don't remember how long it was, a couple
4 days, a day. They came back and were able to tighten up some
5 fittings and slowed it down to, I forget how they worded it. But
6 it was a very small leak and it wouldn't be an issue until they
7 could get everything they needed to do to replace that meter.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. They had, I guess, they used to thread pipe and now they bolt
10 it all together. So, it took them a little while until they had
11 everything ready. They said there were still small leaks but you
12 couldn't smell it. It was very small.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. That was all building one at the boiler house. Building two,
15 I don't recall any leaks there. I think when they did their
16 courtesy thing, I don't recall that they found anything.

17 Q. So, when there was the leak at the boiler house here outside,
18 that was safely addressed. Like you just walked through. Would
19 there have been a different response for an inside small of
20 natural gas?

21 A. I never had that. I would think depending on how bad the
22 smell is and whether or not we can ventilate the room would decide
23 how quickly we need to get on it and whether or not we need to
24 evacuate.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. In the case of the boiler house, it was outside. So, it was
2 well ventilated. So, we could not evacuate the building.

3 Q. Okay. Did you ever have training on what to do in the event
4 of a natural gas leak or, or the smell of natural gas inside of a
5 building?

6 A. No.

7 Q. No. Okay. Did, did you ever get any information from UGI on
8 that?

9 A. I'm sure in some of their mailings. Like when they mailed me
10 to say they were going to do this courtesy check, I'm sure there
11 was some documentation in that, you know. If you smell a leak, do
12 this, this, this. I vaguely remember there being something like
13 that. Like I said, that was in the mailings from UGI. I get them
14 at home, you know, sometimes with the bills. It'll come, it'll
15 tell you, you know, if you smell gas, do this, do that.

16 Q. Yes.

17 A. That's the only training.

18 Q. You know, my (ph.) gas company does that also. Do you know,
19 do you remember what it says to do?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. I know call UGI is probably one of the first things.

23 Q. You don't remember.

24 A. No.

25 Q. Okay. So, just one more question for me. Do you have photos

1 of the, the inside of building two?

2 A. I do not have any photos.

3 Q. No photos.

4 A. No. Left all that there when I retired.

5 Q. Okay. But did you take photos when you were there, when
6 there was working being done?

7 A. Nothing that I can think of. No, no.

8 Q. Okay.

9 MS. LYONS: All right. Thank you. That's all the questions
10 I have for now. Logan?

11 MR. SMITH: Hey, Steve.

12 BY MR. SMITH:

13 Q. Quick question. When the UGI personnel came out, did they
14 leave a service report or anything like that or what work was
15 done? Do you remember?

16 A. Not that I recall.

17 Q. All right. The, the mailings that you would have gotten from
18 UGI with that information in there, after you got that, what was
19 done with it then?

20 A. Probably eventually, we threw it away.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. I, I would have held on to it until they actually did their
23 safety check.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. And then it was probably thrown away after that point.

1 Q. Okay. But was there anything in there that said like
2 examples of sniff tests and stuff like that you can use to, we
3 could use as part of training and things like that?

4 A. Not that I recall.

5 Q. Okay, okay.

6 MR. SMITH: That's all I've got right now.

7 MR. BAUMAN: Hi Steve.

8 MR. SASSAMAN: Next, next.

9 MR. BAUMAN: I'm here.

10 BY MR. BAUMAN:

11 Q. You mentioned the pipes under the road. Do you know how deep
12 the pipes are underneath the road?

13 A. I'm going to guess because I've never measured them.
14 Probably five or six feet.

15 Q. Okay. You mentioned that there is steam heat in the building
16 or is that hot water heat?

17 A. There's steam heat and hot water.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. The, the hot water is mostly gas. There's a large hot water
20 heater down in that basement.

21 Q. Okay. So, the, the steam that's there is like 15 pound
22 steam?

23 A. Yes, yes.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. It's pretty, pretty low.

- 1 Q. Are there any vents of the steam on Cherry Street?
- 2 A. Not that I recall.
- 3 Q. Okay. One other person that we talked to identified some
4 water dripping from some pipes out on Cherry Street.
- 5 A. Could be condensation from refrigeration, room refrigeration
6 or water dripping from building two.
- 7 Q. Building two and building one. He said it dripped onto
8 Cherry Street.
- 9 A. Yes. That would be my guess that it was condensation from --
- 10 Q. Refrigeration?
- 11 A. Refrigeration. Mostly, air conditioning, room air
12 conditioning.
- 13 Q. Okay. When I was out there after the accident, the fire
14 department found a cylinder, a big cylinder. It doesn't show
15 what's in it. Was there acetylene or oxygen or CO2 or any of
16 those type bottles in building two?
- 17 A. There probably was one acetylene and one oxygen. There was a
18 small maintenance shop on the second floor of building two and
19 they would have probably had that in their shop for brazing or
20 welding.
- 21 Q. Okay.
- 22 A. That's, that's the only tanks like that I can think of.
- 23 Q. All right.
- 24 A. Smaller tanks for possibly refrigeration, R22.
- 25 Q. So, your maintenance guys did their own refrigeration work?

- 1 A. Yes.
- 2 Q. Yes.
- 3 A. Minor stuff.
- 4 Q. Minor stuff.
- 5 A. Yes. If we've got bigger, then we call in a contractor.
- 6 Q. What determined whether you did it in house or called in a
7 contractor?
- 8 A. Just how big of a job it appeared. Like I said, small
9 things, possibly leaks in freon. Small things like that we would
10 handle ourselves. Changing filters and air handles, we did that
11 kind of stuff. Simple.
- 12 Q. There is a gas pipe that comes out of building one, goes up
13 the wall and goes around the building and then goes back. And
14 it's on top of, of a building behind building one, sort of
15 underneath the railroad grate.
- 16 A. Okay. That's the loading dock.
- 17 Q. Okay.
- 18 A. There is a generator on the roof of that building or the
19 loading dock. It's a backup for the computer system. And the gas
20 line that you're talking about, I'm pretty sure it goes up to that
21 generator.
- 22 Q. Okay. Any, any problems with that?
- 23 A. No.
- 24 Q. Problem free?
- 25 A. Yes.

- 1 Q. Did you exercise the generator often?
- 2 A. It did it automatically.
- 3 Q. Wow.
- 4 A. And once a year then, I'd bring in and they'd do an oil
5 change and things like that to it.
- 6 Q. Okay.
- 7 A. Just a PM.
- 8 Q. All right. And --
- 9 A. That's what I think that gas line is for.
- 10 Q. Okay. And in your tenure there, would your folks attempted
11 repairs to gas piping on the inside or would that have been an
12 outside type project?
- 13 A. I probably would have got somebody from outside for that. I
14 don't recall anything. System was pretty much trouble free except
15 the leaks at the boiler house.
- 16 Q. Okay.
- 17 A. And that was two or three years ago.
- 18 Q. All right.
- 19 A. Otherwise, as far as the gas, it was pretty trouble free.
- 20 Q. All right.
- 21 MR. BAUMAN: I think that's all I have right now.
- 22 MR. SASSAMAN: Okay.
- 23 MR. BAUMAN: Thank you.
- 24 MR. SASSAMAN: Next.
- 25 MS. WEST: Next. All right.

1 BY MS. WEST:

2 Q. Just kind of following up with what Gary was saying. The gas
3 line that goes out to the boiler, the boiler room, how does it get
4 from one place to the other? Where does it start from main line
5 into the Palmer building one? Does that ring a bell?

6 A. For gas?

7 Q. For the gas system. Yes. It goes from UGI system over to
8 your system. It somehow goes above ground. Does it come in
9 through your building?

10 A. It comes in under the, under the street, off Cherry Street --

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. -- to the gas meter and bypass piping. That's all outside
13 right next to boiler house.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. So, it comes in underground.

16 Q. Okay. And into that meter by boiler, the boiler room.

17 A. Mm-hm.

18 Q. And then how does it go from the boiler room over to this
19 unit?

20 A. It's a separate line off the main UGI.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. Building two had its own supply and meter.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. And that was on the pictures. That's the building two meter.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. So, building one's meter would be farther down Cherry Street
2 and then it would come off this side. And that's where the meter
3 was sitting in the boiler house.

4 Q. At the boiler house. And then it goes above ground over to
5 building one.

6 A. No. The one he saw, I'm getting confused.

7 Q. Yes. I know. It's hard because we're not picturing it.

8 A. Yes. The pipe he saw comes out of the basement of building
9 one and goes outside on the wall back under the tracks.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. And that's where that generator was.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. Does that make sense?

14 Q. It does.

15 A. Okay.

16 Q. Thank you. Didn't quite understand what you meant by the
17 trolley that's set up and they use it to, the driver may use it to
18 climb on to the trucks.

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. So, why do they need to get on top of the trucks?

21 A. When the truck is unloading chocolate and it gets low, they
22 have to scrape. They have a long pole --

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. -- with a rubber scraper on the end. And they have to scrape
25 the excess chocolate --

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. -- to try to get every bit out of the truck.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. While they're on the top of the truck doing that, they need
5 to wear fall protection.

6 Q. And that's why it's there?

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. Okay. One question. I just had a quick question for you.
9 When the replacement was done on the meter in building two, you
10 said you weren't there. Was there anyone from your staff that may
11 have been there assisting them or overseeing them or monitoring
12 them or just looking?

13 A. No. I'm sure we didn't have anybody there the whole time
14 with them.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Just lack of resources. But I'm sure I would have walked out
17 at least once or twice while they were doing it. Just everything
18 going okay? Nothing out of the ordinary. So, I went off to the
19 next thing.

20 Q. With two buildings, yes. Okay.

21 A. It was mostly production things that took up the time of my
22 days.

23 Q. You answered this question. Yes.

24 MS. WEST: I think I'm good.

25 MR. SASSMAN: Okay.

1 MS. WEST: Thank you. Appreciate it.

2 MR. SASSAMAN: Thank you. You're next.

3 MR. WHITEASH: My part. Yes. Just a few questions,
4 clarifying questions.

5 BY MR. WHITEASH:

6 Q. So, in building two, you said the steam, there was steam heat
7 in there. Right?

8 A. Mm-hm.

9 Q. There was radiant heat and you said a steam heater with a
10 coil as well. Was that like air that was blown through the coil?

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. So, that was heated by steam. Right?

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. I just wanted to clarify that. The, the steam line and
17 compressed air line underneath Cherry Street, I assume that was
18 there prior to you starting.

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Okay. Do you know if any of that, were both of them steel, I
21 presume? Is that correct?

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. Do you know if any of them were encased in another steel
24 component?

25 A. I think they were all inside of a larger, I believe it was

1 steel. Again, that was before my time.

2 Q. Yes.

3 A. But they were all inside of a large pipe. The chocolate
4 pipes would have been insulated. And there's probably a heat,
5 electric heat tape on that pipe to keep it warm.

6 Q. Do you know what temperature they kept that at?

7 A. Probably right around 100.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. Just enough to keep the chocolate melted.

10 Q. Now, did your team maintain the heating system, the steam
11 boiler and all that and whatever goes along with that?

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. Going back to one of the questions Gary had there about the
14 steam dripping. There was something right around here on the edge
15 of the building. You don't recall what that, it's not on this
16 picture but it's around that area.

17 A. Trying to think what's in that area in the building.

18 Q. Yes. No problem.

19 A. In front of the building, there was a window air condition on
20 the second floor. But on the side of the building, I'm not sure
21 what that was.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Off the top of my head, I'm not sure.

24 Q. And on the other side of the building, there was, near the
25 elevator shaft, there was a pipe in the air, maybe 15 feet in the

1 air. I've heard that steam came out of that every now and then.
2 Do you recall that one either?

3 A. With steam coming out of it, that I don't recall.

4 Q. Okay. I think that's it.

5 MR. WHITEASH: Thank you.

6 MR. SASSAMAN: Okay. Back to you.

7 MS. LYONS: All right. I have, I have a few more for you.

8 BY MS. LYONS:

9 Q. So, I know you don't remember a lot from the meter relocation
10 but I'm just going to ask these questions so I get that clearly
11 answered. Did you, to your memory, did you provide any
12 information, requests or other input about the service line
13 location for this new meter to building two in 2021 to the UGI
14 crew?

15 A. No.

16 Q. No. Okay. Are you aware of any other work that was
17 performed on the underground facilities that were, you know, in
18 this vicinity, like the area that you IDed in the time that you
19 were there?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Okay. Are you aware of any issues with fires in general at
22 the Palmer facility?

23 A. No.

24 Q. No. Any issues with the chocolate lines? We've heard that
25 they're heated. Any issues with the heating?

1 A. I'm sure there has been times that, you know, heat tape went
2 bad or something happened that the electric got turned off. It
3 just, it makes for a solid chocolate pipe. I don't recall
4 anything specific.

5 Q. What is it, what do you mean heat tape went bad?

6 A. Occasionally, they stop working and we have to replace them.
7 That one probably, when it was put it, it probably had two
8 separate heat tapes put on it just because if one goes bad,
9 because it's buried under the street, it's hard to repair. So, we
10 put a spare tape on.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. So, if this one goes bad, we can switch over to that one.

13 Q. Was that done while you were working at Palmer?

14 A. No.

15 Q. The install?

16 A. No. That was before my time.

17 Q. Okay. So, all of those, the steam pipe, all the chocolate
18 lines and the air, the pressurized air was there before you
19 started?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. And you're not aware of any work on the section that was
22 underground.

23 A. No.

24 Q. You mentioned that there is a shop associated with building
25 two. So, again, this is building two I believe. This is Cherry

1 Street. You can see the chocolate truck here. It's at building
2 one. Where is that shop?

3 A. It would be back here.

4 Q. Like in this area?

5 A. Yes. On the second floor.

6 Q. And that shop is where, is the location where acetylene or
7 R22 would have been stored?

8 A. Yes. We used the shop mostly to store parts for the
9 machines, normal things, nuts and bolts so you don't have to run
10 to the other building every time you need a part.

11 Q. Sure.

12 A. So, it was more for storage. It would have been back in this
13 area.

14 Q. Okay. And I think that's this part right here looking, so,
15 this is Second Avenue.

16 A. Right.

17 Q. Could you see out on Second Avenue? It might been there.

18 A. The windows were closed up. So --

19 Q. Should I say it could have been like either one of these --

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. -- locations?

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. Let's say here. Let's make, I'm going to make that circle a
24 little bigger kind of in that vicinity. Does that seem right?

25 A. Yes.

1 Q. Okay. All right. And then the building one generator. So,
2 this is building one. This is Franklin Street here. This is
3 Second Avenue. So, where's the generator?

4 A. It's pretty much under the railroad tracks.

5 Q. Around here?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. And it's on the roof?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. Is it exposed or is it covered?

10 A. What's that?

11 Q. Is it exposed?

12 A. The generator?

13 Q. Uh-huh.

14 A. Yes. I mean, it's got its own cabinet that everything is in.

15 Q. Okay. Let's see. So, you said that you're not familiar with
16 any fire events in, at building one or two in the time that you
17 were there. How about training in the event of a fire? Did you
18 have training?

19 A. We did some. Yes. We had a safety committee. And once a
20 year, there was a training video and there was a test that they
21 gave out once a year. All the maintenance people and I think the
22 production people, like the production people that run the molding
23 lines, they all went through that training every year.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. There was a video you watched and there was a paper handout.

1 And then there was a test so we could make sure that they
2 understood what they read.

3 Q. Okay. So, that's something each individual could do on their
4 own time? They could, they could do it on their own time or did
5 everyone get together to watch the video and discuss?

6 A. Because of production reasons, they probably would just take
7 a couple people at a time.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. There was a small training room. So, maybe they'd have half
10 a dozen people at a time.

11 Q. Okay. And what types of topics would be covered?

12 A. All the different types of fire extinguishers, you know, how
13 to use a fire extinguisher. I'm not sure what else. It was
14 mostly how to use the fire extinguishers. Get out and, getting
15 out of a building, letting people know there's a fire, you know.
16 Get everybody out of that area.

17 Q. Okay. Do you recall training on natural gas in any of those
18 meetings?

19 A. Do I recall?

20 Q. Being trained on natural gas during any of those discussions?

21 A. Not that I recall.

22 Q. Okay.

23 MS. LYONS: Thank you.

24 MR. SMITH: I'm good. I don't have anything.

25 MR. BAUMAN: One additional question.

1 BY MR. BAUMAN:

2 Q. Did they store flammable liquids in building number two?

3 A. The only flammable liquid in building two that I can recall
4 is alcohol, 180 proof alcohol. They use it in the refrigeration
5 system for the molding line. The rollers that form the chocolate
6 run at about -30 Fahrenheit.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. So, there probably would have been a 55 gallon drum of that
9 alcohol. And of course, the system itself, the compressor and the
10 piping. But we used to store one extra drum in case there was a
11 leak or something. That's the only flammable liquid I can think
12 of over there.

13 Q. Okay. I'm not familiar with an air alcohol cooling system.
14 Could you explain that a little more?

15 A. As best I can.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. I mean, I don't completely understand it either. I don't
18 know what the freon number was. I don't remember that. But you
19 had a compressor, heat exchanger and instead of pumping water
20 through the heat exchangers, because it's -30, they use alcohol
21 because that doesn't freeze up.

22 Q. Okay. So, I got a little better understanding. So, they
23 have a conventional freon based --

24 A. Compressor.

25 Q. -- compressor system that transfer the cold to the alcohol

1 and then the alcohol circulates through the machines cooling the
2 chocolate.

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Cool. All right. That's the end. How was the drum stored
7 and where was the drum stored?

8 A. On the first floor along the molding line, there's a, one of
9 the yellow cages. And the barrel is stored in that cage, in a
10 flammable cage.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. All right.

14 MR. BAUMAN: Thank you very much. That was interesting.

15 MR. SASSAMAN: Yes. I had never seen the use of alcohol like
16 that before. News to me but it worked well.

17 MS. WEST: Let's see. Actually, I thought about a couple
18 questions.

19 MR. SASSAMAN: Okay.

20 MS. WEST: I was waiting for you to say next.

21 BY MS. WEST:

22 Q. Talk to me about emergency response. I know, emergency
23 response.

24 A. Okay.

25 Q. Sara was mentioning that. And just to follow up, for your

1 experience, did you go through an emergency response of some sort
2 since you were in charge of the buildings? Were you a part of the
3 emergency response, a team or organization that looks at how
4 buildings can be exited quickly? Were you a part of that or --

5 A. Yes. They had, the company had what they called the red
6 book.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. And it was, tried every scenario and what to do, who to call.
9 And all the supervisors, plant managers, we have a copy of that.
10 I had a copy of that. And that covered all kinds of things.

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. Even as far as a couple times the river started getting,
13 getting high and what to do if it starts to flood and just
14 different things like that.

15 Q. Okay. So, all the supervisors had a copy.

16 A. Getting wild out there.

17 Q. I know. Did anybody else have a copy or were they in display
18 or something of (indiscernible)?

19 A. I guess, the other, the other supervisors would have had one.
20 Plant managers would have had one. I had one. That's probably, I
21 mean, it wasn't like they were everywhere but --

22 Q. Right.

23 A. -- the people that needed it had a copy of it.

24 Q. Okay. And did you drill on that or --

25 A. Not, not everything in the book. No.

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. I mean, they had fire drills and, but we didn't go over
3 everything in the book.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. I mean, I had, I had sat down and looked through. None of
6 that, doesn't so much pertain to me.

7 Q. As far as, I think you touched on what generally speaking was
8 the training. How about you? Did you have much training in
9 emergency response and --

10 A. No.

11 Q. You had the annual and --

12 A. The annual.

13 Q. Okay. Now, were you a member of the safety committee?

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Yes. They tried to have a person from production from each
17 shift in different areas and then maintenance. HR was at those
18 meetings.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. Had those once a month. The production workers would try to
21 bring any safety suggestions or any safety problems. They'd bring
22 up at the meeting --

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. And then the minutes from that would get posted and I'd get a
25 copy. And maintenance would do what we have to do to make things

1 safe.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. And then the next month, that's the first thing we'd report
4 on, what got done. If it didn't get done, why it didn't get done,
5 when it's going to be done.

6 Q. Okay. If it was done monthly, where were the notes posted?

7 A. HR kept all the, they kind of ran the meeting.

8 Q. Okay. Was it on display so all the staff could see it or --

9 A. I think they did post that. You know, I got my copy and, but
10 I think they posted it so everybody could see.

11 Q. Okay. All right.

12 MS. WEST: I guess that's it for me. Thank you.

13 MR. SASSAMAN: Okay. Your turn.

14 MS. WEST: You're waiving (ph.) that.

15 MR. WHITEASH: I'm just looking to clarify that we covered
16 everything that goes underneath Cherry Street. So, from what I
17 understand, there's a steam line. There's a compressed air line
18 and chocolate lines.

19 BY MR. WHITEASH:

20 Q. Is that everything?

21 A. Yes. I believe there were two, possibly three chocolate
22 pipes.

23 Q. Okay. Nothing refrigeration-wise or anything like that?

24 A. No.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. Any refrigeration was contained in that building.

2 Q. For protection, right?

3 A. Mm-hm.

4 MR. WHITEASH: Okay. Thank you.

5 MS. LYONS: I just have a couple questions.

6 MR. SASSAMAN: Okay.

7 BY MS. LYONS:

8 Q. So, if one of your staff had a problem, like a natural gas
9 issue or anything like that, what would you expect them to do?

10 A. I would expect them to go to the shift supervisor and let
11 them know of the leak. At that point, I would hope that the plant
12 manager, shift supervisor would call UGI. They would probably
13 have called me. I had a work cellphone I carried all the time.
14 So, for larger problems, sometimes they'd call me at home just for
15 my advice or whatever.

16 Q. Okay. And just so I'm clear. So, an employee, their, their
17 direct supervisor would be called shift supervisor. Is that
18 correct?

19 A. Yes. In between there, you had lead girls. In building two,
20 for example, they had 12 foiling machines and they had two or
21 three people that took care of those. One of those people was the
22 lead girl. We would call, she kind of, okay. You guys go do
23 this. You do that. She would report to the shift supervisor.

24 Q. Okay, okay. And then above the shift supervisor, is the
25 plant manager the next --

1 A. Yes.

2 Q. The shift supervisor's supervisor is the plant manager.

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Yes. Okay, okay. Great. Can the, can the lead just go
5 straight up to the plant manager to report an issue?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. Yes. We try to be open both ways. So, yes.

9 Q. Okay. Great. That's all the questions I had. So, the final
10 question we always ask, is there anything that you think might be
11 important that we didn't already ask you?

12 A. Not that I can think of. Not that I can think of.

13 Q. All right.

14 A. Lost a couple good people.

15 MS. LYONS: Okay. Well, thank you. So, this concludes our
16 interview.

17 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

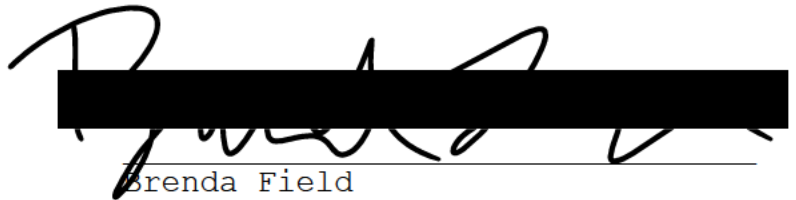
IN THE MATTER OF: NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION AND FIRE
NEAR WEST READING, PENNSYLVANIA
ON MARCH 24, 2023
Interview of Stephen Sassaman

ACCIDENT NO.: PLD23LR002

PLACE: Wyomissing, Pennsylvania

DATE: April 21, 2023

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.



Brenda Field
Transcriber

①

2nd Floor
shop /
chemical parts
storage



Fall witness
connects to
I-beam



Steve Sassaman Interview
PJD23LR002 - West Parking

under railroad tracks (not visible)
Bldg 1 generator on roof.

2

Steve Sassaman - Interview
PUD 23LR002 - West Redding



hatch
for
→ chocolate
truck
connection
(~3-4')

underground
↳ choc line,
Steam line,
press air

National Transportation Safety Board

Office of Railroad, Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Investigations
Washington, DC 20594



Interview Regarding Investigation PLD23LR002

**UGI Corporation Natural Gas-Fueled Explosion and Fire
West Reading, PA
March 24, 2023**

Name: STEPHAN SASSAMAN

Organization: R.M. PALMER CO.

Title: RETIRED MAINT. SUPERVISOR

Date of Interview: 4/21/2023

I have reviewed my transcript(s) from the above referenced accident and:

- I have no comments to make.
- My comments are submitted herewith.
- My comments are marked on the attached copy.

Signature: 