

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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FATAL AMTRAK DERAILMENT *

NEAR JOPLIN, MONTANA * Accident No.: RRD21MR017

ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2021 *

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Interview of: JP JOHNSON, Brakeman
Amtrak

Shelby, Montana

Monday,
September 27, 2021

APPEARANCES:

ZACH ZAGATA, Investigator, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

STEPHEN JENNER, Ph.D., Human Performance Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

STACEY THOMPSON, Operating Practices Specialist
Federal Railroad Administration

STACY CHAVEZ, Operating Practices Inspector
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AARON RATLEDGE, Assistant Vice President Operating
Practices and Rules
BNSF Railway

PAUL O'MARA, Assistant Vice President Transportation
Amtrak

PATRICK SULLIVAN, Superintendent of Transportation
Amtrak

BRIAN FRANSEN, Member, Safety Task Force
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen (BLET)

JIM CHASE, Member, National Safety Team
SMART Transportation Division

PATRICK HARRISON, Local Chairman
SMART Transportation Division

I N D E X

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I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. ZAGATA: Good afternoon. My name is Zach Zagata, and I
3 am the NTSB operations group chairman for this accident. We are
4 conducting an interview on September 27, 2021, with JP Johnson,
5 who works for Amtrak. This interview is in conjunction with
6 NTSB's investigation of the accident near Joplin, Montana. The
7 NTSB accident reference number is RRD21MR017. The purpose of the
8 investigation is to increase safety and not assign, fault, blame
9 or liability.

10 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
11 and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name, and title.
12 I'll start off and then pass it to my right. Again, my name is
13 Zach Zagata. That's Z-a-g-a-t-a, and I am the NTSB operations
14 group chairman.

15 MR. HARRISON: Pat Harrison, SMART TD. I'm the
16 representative for the union.

17 MR. JOHNSON: JP Johnson, brakeman, Amtrak.

18 MR. FRANSEN: Brian Fransen, F-r-a-n-s-e-n, BLET Safety Task
19 Force.

20 MR. CHASE: Jim Chase, C-h-a-s-e, SMART National Safety Team.

21 MS. THOMPSON: Stacey Thompson, T-h-o-m-p-s-o-n, FRA
22 operating practices specialist.

23 MR. RATLEDGE: Aaron Ratledge, R-a-t-l-e-d-g-e, BNSF Railway,
24 operating practices and rules.

25 MR. O'MARA: Paul O'Mara, O-M-a-r-a, assistant vice president

1 transportation for Amtrak.

2 MR. CHAVEZ: Stacy Chavez, C-h-a-v-e-z, FRA operating
3 practices inspector, Helena.

4 DR. JENNER: Stephen Jenner, S-t-e-p-h-e-n, J-e-n-n-e-r,
5 human performance with the NTSB.

6 MR. SULLIVAN: Patrick Sullivan, S-u-l-l-i-v-a-n. Amtrak
7 superintendent of transportation.

8 MR. ZAGATA: Okay. Thank you.

9 Do we have your permission to record our discussion with you
10 today?

11 MR. JOHNSON: Yes, sir.

12 MR. ZAGATA: Thank you.

13 Do you understand the transcripts will be part of the public
14 docket and, as such, we cannot guarantee any confidentiality?

15 MR. JOHNSON: Yes, sir.

16 MR. ZAGATA: Thank you.

17 INTERVIEW OF JP JOHNSON

18 BY MR. ZAGATA:

19 Q. All right. To start off with, if you could, just kind of
20 give us an overview of your railroad career.

21 A. I hired out on the Union Pacific April 2, 2007, as a
22 conductor. Trained in North Platte, Nebraska. Spent the next
23 couple of years Bill, Wyoming as a conductor. Transferred to main
24 line April 19, 2010, working both at Rawlins, Wyoming, and then
25 Cheyenne, until roughly February of 2017. Left the Union Pacific,

1 came to Amtrak. Seniority date with Amtrak is the 30th of May
2 2017, and have served in the capacity as both a brakeman and a
3 conductor for Amtrak. Since then, at this point, for the last --
4 with the exception of the furlough that happened, I've been
5 serving as a brakeman for the last almost 2 years with various
6 conductors on various crews.

7 Q. Has that been for the last 2 years on this territory; is that
8 correct?

9 A. Yes. On the -- both the -- I'm qualified on the Glasgow Sub,
10 Milk River Sub, Hi-Line Sub, the Kootenai Sub, and the Spokane
11 Subdivision of the BNSF. Both fall under the Montana Division and
12 Northwest Division. And been qualified on this territory since
13 obviously May -- 19 May 2017.

14 Q. All right. Appreciate it. If you could just kind of give us
15 an overview, a summary of your trip. We don't need details about
16 everything you saw, but just kind of walk us through your trip, if
17 you could?

18 A. From beginning to end?

19 Q. Please.

20 A. Reported to work at the normal time, 0821, I believe. They
21 just changed it. It used to be 0816, I believe, but that's beside
22 the point. Had a normal job briefing with both the inbound crew
23 from St. Cloud and amongst each other. Then we went out to the
24 train. I set my stuff in the dorm car in our little office. I
25 went back and briefed my coach attendants on where and when they'd

1 be working the train. And departed on time. Running air test was
2 good. And following that, I -- normal procedure for me is to go
3 through and lift the tickets for the people that got on at Minot,
4 North Dakota. We do a short count, meaning we got to know what
5 all the stations between -- bear with me a minute -- Minot and
6 Shelby that requires specific attention, get a counting of the
7 passengers from there -- that are going to get off there, so we
8 know which cars to spot.

9 I radioed up to the conductor the short count was as
10 advertised, and then I took position -- my normal position for me
11 is the sightseer lounge car, upstairs. Reserved myself a little
12 table to make my desk, and proceeded normally. Also, my
13 responsibility to remind the head end of the slow orders. So
14 Stanley, North Dakota went off without a hitch. You know, they
15 have a slow order between Stanley and Williston, but we got in at
16 Williston, on time out of there. Then continue on.

17 The whole time I was in the sightseer lounge. And each
18 station stop I would -- just at various doors where needed. So
19 Wolf Point was good, on time out of there. I -- just a couple of
20 slow orders between Wolf Point and Glasgow. Got to Glasgow, on
21 time out of there. I just remember specifically there was a slow
22 order at Tampico. Got into Malta on time. Three slow orders
23 leaving Malta, as I recall. I'm not positive on that number. And
24 arrived at Havre, where we had a schedule. Havre we let the
25 passengers detrain and stretch a little bit after we fuel and

1 service the locomotives because we had some time before departure.
2 Just did a quick check with my coach attendants just to make sure
3 everything was all right. Got on the back of the train and we
4 eyeballed Havre on time, 1504, I believe.

5 No slow orders on the Hi-Line Sub were listed, so I was
6 getting ready to, you know, just relax because we were basically
7 on home run, from Havre to Shelby there. And then the dispatcher
8 calling us, said we were going to have to follow a drag to
9 Gildford, a grain train. Sorry, I'm using older terms, antiquated
10 terms. But we got around him at Gildford.

11 The dispatcher called us and said we have a Box 2, which is a
12 false or partial activation of a crossing, near Chester,
13 1022.--something. And engineers read it off the PTC screen to
14 Dennis, my conductor, Mr. Richter. At the same time he was
15 copying the Box 2, I copied it as well. And he repeated it. You
16 know, I didn't need -- I didn't see the need to -- you know, I'm
17 not -- I wasn't the conductor, so I didn't need to repeat the
18 mandatory directive, but I just needed to understand it. And I
19 copied it back -- on the back page of my orders, and was speaking
20 with the gentleman behind me and two gentlemen across from me when
21 they asked me what was going on.

22 I had my radio up, but -- I just might throw this in here
23 just as a side note. When you're sitting in that lounge and the
24 radio's on and the passengers hear what's going on, it kind of
25 calms them, let's them know that they're in good -- we're not

1 holding back on things. I'm sorry if I digress.

2 But got through Kremlin. Okay, got to Gildford. Had an
3 advance approach to a diverging clear signal, as I recall, to take
4 us over to number 2 track. And I think we were about Hingham or
5 Hingham center -- or Hingham west, rather, when we finally caught
6 the train and passed it.

7 Everything was going routine. I was actually kind of
8 relaxed. And we went through the OS at Joplin fine. Pulled my
9 watch out, checked my watch at the milepost. We were dead on with
10 speed. I'm kind of old fashioned that way. I like to know what's
11 going on by checking by my watch, you know. I think before, I had
12 just radioed up the reminder of the Box 2 crossing warning. Did
13 another time check with my watch again, replaced it in my pocket.
14 And I, you know, know by the landmarks I noticed we were coming up
15 on Buell. And -- bear with me a minute here.

16 All of a sudden, all hell broke loose. Lounge car went from
17 one side to the other, back to the other, and then we were on the
18 ground. It felt like the train drug the car, was still attached
19 to the train part -- that lounge car was still attached to the
20 train, and drug it, I don't know, I -- by my guess it was 100, 150
21 yards. I don't know. But as we were being drug, a spring came
22 through the window just ahead of me about a foot in front of my
23 face, ricocheted and went back out. Came to a stop. I stood up,
24 just out of habit dusted myself off, put my hat back on, and
25 started to evacuate the car.

1 I noticed that the guy that was sitting behind me who I had
2 been talking to was dead underneath the car. Passengers kept
3 pointing to him and I said, he's gone, get out of here, let's get
4 out of here. I got all my people out of there safely with the
5 exception, of course, of the fatality.

6 Then the way the car was on its side, I was actually facing
7 the staircase. I heard three people in the lower level of the car
8 where the café snack bar, café lounge, however you want to put it,
9 different terms. They were trying to get out of there and I
10 yelled at them. I said, okay, here's what you do. I said, do you
11 see the door? I said, now open it carefully. It's going to open
12 inward, stand back. They opened the door up. I kept yelling for
13 Richard Curley (ph.), the LSA, lead service attendant in the
14 lounge running the snack bar. I couldn't hear him. I could only
15 hear the two people, and they said he's unconscious. I don't
16 know, but --

17 Needless to say, then, after I made sure that those people
18 were on their way out, I crawled out the back of the car. I hit
19 the ground, dusted myself off, and then I went -- I ran back to
20 the 14 car, coach right -- which is the coach right behind the
21 lounge. Those three cars were on their side, like I said, I think
22 100, 150 feet -- they were yards back.

23 I crawled into the 14 car through the -- what was the
24 vestibule, and I helped some people get out of there. We had some
25 people trapped. I said to -- I crawled back out. I started

1 directing people to the area next to the Buell shanty, East Buell
2 shanty. I had designated that earlier as our rally and triage
3 area because it was a -- just by looking at it, it was the most
4 accessible point for emergency vehicles. I started sending people
5 that direction, and then I went back to helping people climb off.
6 Dennis was back there, of course. Mr. Richter was back there.

7 The radio was still working good. I had good radio contact.
8 After things started to settle down, I called the head end and
9 checked on the engineer and the fireman, made sure they were okay
10 up there. I really didn't take stock of the entire accident and,
11 but -- until I made sure all the passengers were gone, you know,
12 and we kind of sat there and just kind of looked at each other,
13 you know. But --

14 And then road foreman Blevins and BNSF road foreman -- his
15 name escapes me right now here -- picked us up, took us to the
16 hospital for the tox box: urine analysis, blood, breathalyzer.
17 And then I told them that they needed to see me and Mr. Richter,
18 we needed to see a doctor. I believe Mr. Richter's shoulders
19 hurt. I was treated for whiplash and bruising. Road foreman
20 Blevins brought me back to -- after treatment was completed, road
21 foreman Blevins brought me back here. I picked up my grip. He
22 took me to my car at the station, and I drove home and that was
23 the end of it.

24 MR. ZAGATA: Thank you. At this point I'll turn it over to
25 Steve Jenner. He's got a few questions for you.

1 DR. JENNER: Thank you.

2 BY DR. JENNER:

3 Q. I appreciate your recap. It helps us to understand portions
4 we didn't know yet, so I appreciate that.

5 When the accident occurred, just to clarify, you were still
6 on the upper level?

7 A. On the engineer's side, first table.

8 Q. And the person who was killed in the accident was sitting
9 right behind you?

10 A. At that table. I was -- yes, that's correct.

11 Q. So you described yourself giving directions about -- to
12 passengers how to open the door. Were they -- well, first of all,
13 what was the mood of the passengers at the time? Was there panic?
14 Was there calm?

15 A. It was -- there was a distinct urgency, I would say. I don't
16 recall panic, but an urgency to get away and be safe, maybe. I
17 wouldn't call it panic. Of course, at the time, I wasn't able
18 to -- I wasn't in a state of mind to judge what the emotion was.
19 But just an urgency to get away and get safe and to help others,
20 of course. Passengers on the lower level followed my instructions
21 and were able to evacuate because of that.

22 I also -- I might add, I also explained to them how to
23 operate the emergency windows. But I told them, I said that that
24 probably wouldn't be a good idea because those windows will fall
25 in. But I said -- I told them how to do it anyhow, I mean, just

1 out of spite -- maybe out of training. I don't know what it was,
2 but -- and as I said before, I was the last one out of the car,
3 so --

4 Q. Did any of the passengers try to use the window?

5 A. No. Most of them were on the side -- laying on the side, the
6 engineer's side where I was, and the nearest point of opportunity
7 was the vestibule door behind me. I believe that would've been
8 the one facing east. And that was crawled out. And by the time I
9 started getting people to that door, you know, there were other
10 people outside helping them out there.

11 Q. The other people, are those other passengers or --

12 A. Other passengers, yes.

13 Q. Right.

14 A. We didn't have -- the medics didn't show up until probably
15 about a half hour, which was -- that was quick enough for -- rural
16 Montana, a half hour is a, pardon my language, a damn good
17 response time to something like that. I have to give them -- I
18 have to hand it to them.

19 Q. Right. So when you're saying medics, are you referring to
20 ambulances?

21 A. Yes. Yes. First responders, ambulances.

22 Q. How about like the fire department? Were they the first on
23 scene?

24 A. Well, both -- in these rural communities, both the fire
25 department and the ambulance is one thing.

1 Q. Got it. So you estimate it's about 30 minutes that they
2 took?

3 A. It might have been 30 minutes, it could've been less, but I
4 would say 30 minutes.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. Before I -- you know, it was after I already started sending
7 people to the rally and triage point.

8 Q. If you could estimate how long it took for the passengers in
9 your car to completely evacuate?

10 A. I had them evacuated probably between 5 and 7½ minutes,
11 maybe. The ones that were upstairs, rather, with me, it took a
12 little bit longer. I couldn't tell you how long it took for the
13 people lower level to crawl out, but they were evacuated before I
14 left the car.

15 Q. Did you find that the passengers were overall cooperative?

16 A. Very much so. Like I said, there was just this distinct
17 sense of urgency. I didn't sense any panic. But like I said, my
18 senses at the time were pretty numb as to, you know, feelings.
19 You just, you want to -- I just ensure everybody's calm and safe.

20 Q. Did you -- you mentioned getting whiplash. Was that a result
21 of the initial impact or might've that come later for some reason?

22 A. I don't have any idea. It wasn't later. I didn't feel it
23 until the adrenaline wore off.

24 Q. Sure. I was curious about, have you received emergency
25 response training -- emergency retraining or emergency incident

1 training from Amtrak?

2 A. Yeah. I mean it -- yeah, we have.

3 Q. Okay. Can you reflect on how that training might've helped
4 in this instance?

5 A. Well -- bear with me a minute here. The training that Amtrak
6 gave us was -- well, I don't know, I'm not a -- training scenarios
7 are never exactly precise. You know, you don't know how an
8 accident -- how something like this is going to unfold. The
9 training that the company did give us, gave us somewhat of a good
10 foundation or a foundation. That's all I can tell you there.
11 That's the best way -- only way I can describe it.

12 Q. If you had time to think about it, is there other type of
13 training or equipment that would've benefited you?

14 A. Well, the sledge hammers and the crowbars aren't enough. We
15 got to have something else in there. I don't know what though. I
16 couldn't tell you. The sledges will work to a certain extent,
17 but, you know, even hammering on it with the crowbar in the 14 car
18 we couldn't jostle the seat loose. That's when the paramedics or
19 rescue had to bring the Jaws of Life in, cut that lady out of
20 there. So had this been a lesser derailment, if you can use that
21 term -- I don't know if that's a precise term to use, but had it
22 been, you know, the crowbar and the sledge might have been
23 adequate. But I don't know what other tools to put in there.
24 Maybe a chisel. I really don't know.

25 Q. Okay. Is there emergency lighting that was activated?

1 A. Well, the emergency lighting didn't -- the car -- the
2 electrical system, I think, in the cars failed. I don't know. I
3 wasn't paying attention to emergency lighting. I was paying
4 attention to getting my people out.

5 I was also worried that the -- I distinctly remember thinking
6 about the head-end power being activated or, you know, was there
7 any danger of electrocution, because -- and then I kind of filed
8 that to the back of my head and went back to work, you know. But
9 I heard the BNSF road foreman called and said "Is your HEP
10 deactivated?" and he said the trains and the head end -- Bob Clary
11 said that everything was shut down. So when I heard that, that
12 put that to rest.

13 But emergency lighting, where I was at in the lounge, if it
14 came on, I don't remember it. I honestly don't. I wasn't paying
15 attention to the emergency lighting. More so I was trying to help
16 people.

17 Q. Could you reflect on how the onboard service people, you
18 know, what sort of activities they were doing post-accident?

19 A. They were doing good. I ran across one of the coach
20 attendants or one of the sleeping car attendants. I sent him back
21 for blankets and towels and sheets in case we needed to come up
22 with some sort of bandages, you know, if there was going to be a
23 delay, you know. But onboard staff was excellent. Rear end
24 sleeping car attendant, Alberto Figueroa, was absolutely
25 magnificent in his help with us. Got to hand it him. Onboard

1 staff was doing -- did a, well, an excellent job, in my opinion.
2 You know, not only are you scared for your passengers, you're also
3 scared for them, too. Because they trust you, too, to get them
4 from one end of the line to other end.

5 DR. JENNER: I think that's all the questions I have. Thank
6 you very much.

7 MR. ZAGATA: Zach Zagata, NTSB. One additional question I
8 just thought of as you talked here.

9 BY MR. ZAGATA:

10 Q. Had you not given the passengers instruction on how to get
11 out of there, do you think they would've known or what do you
12 think would've happened?

13 A. Well, I'm pretty sure, given the human condition, they
14 would've figured out a way out. It was just when I heard them
15 yelling down there, it was just -- I just switched in. I couldn't
16 get to them because the stairs were the way they were, you know.
17 There wasn't any way to get to them to help them. I think they
18 would've maybe figured it out. I don't know what their mental
19 state was. I just felt that I needed to give instructions to them
20 on how to operate because that's the only thing that was going
21 through my mind at the time.

22 Q. So do you think if you -- they would've been more operating
23 on instinct, right, than --

24 A. Very well could have. Like I said, the human condition's --
25 it's hard to say, given the human condition. I don't know what --

1 I didn't know these people obviously personally, but I -- they may
2 have been able to figure their way out. I don't know.

3 Q. Is there --

4 A. I just felt the need that instruction needed to be given.

5 Q. Is there any kind of guidance that a passenger receives on
6 how to handle a situation like that, how to react?

7 A. Well, we -- at the beginning of my day, get on the train and
8 I make a safety announcement, which is required by rule, our blue
9 book. Mr. O'Mara can probably attest to this. The last thing I
10 say in that initial announcement, I say -- and I can quote it: If
11 you have any questions as to the safety features on board our
12 Amtrak trains, please consult the blue and white card in your
13 sleeping car compartment, or if you are in the coaches, the card
14 will be in the seatback pocket in front of you. Should you have
15 any further questions, feel free to ask a uniformed Amtrak
16 employee. And then I say, the brakeman will be in the lounge for
17 your convenience today should you have need of my services.
18 That's the final thing in the announcement that I say.

19 Q. I appreciate it.

20 MR. ZAGATA: Anybody else have any additional questions?

21 Do you have anything else you'd like to add to it, JP?

22 MR. JOHNSON: Well, I just have one request of Amtrak, if I
23 could, Mr. O'Mara. I don't -- I'm not trying to be a smart aleck
24 or just to be -- have this on the record, but is there any way the
25 company could come up with a new shirt and a new hat for me?

1 MR. O'MARA: I'll make sure you get plenty of them. Not a
2 problem.

3 MR. JOHNSON: Because the old hat got a step or two on it,
4 but it still was wearable. I'll tell you this much, too, as well.
5 When these passengers, they don't know what to do, they always
6 look for the man with the hat. That's one of the reasons I put
7 the hat back on. Because I had remembered hearing it from an old
8 timer back in the day, you wear that hat and they just flock to
9 you. He said always wear your hat if you can. I just wanted --
10 thought I should mention that for the record.

11 MR. ZAGATA: Okay. Once again, JP, thank you so much for
12 taking the time to meet with us.

13 MR. JOHNSON: Okay.

14 MR. ZAGATA: Hey, I appreciate it, you can help us out.

15 MR. JOHNSON: Thank you.

16 MR. ZAGATA: With that, we're done.

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

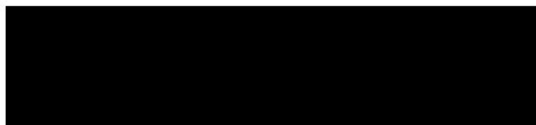
IN THE MATTER OF: FATAL AMTRAK DERAILMENT
NEAR JOPLIN, MONTANA
ON SEPTEMBER 25, 2021
Interview of JP Johnson

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD21MR017

PLACE: Shelby, Montana

DATE: September 27, 2021

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.



Kay Maurer
Transcriber