

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

TRAIN DERAILMENT NEAR NEW CASTLE, *
PENNSYLVANIA ON MAY 10, 2023 *

Accident No.: RRD23FR011

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Interview of: AARON BROWN, Conductor on the NS C36
Norfolk Southern Railway

Saturday,
May 13, 2023

APPEARANCES:

ZACH ZAGATA, Investigator in Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

RICHARD SKOLNEKOVICH, Operations Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

BRIAN FRANSEN, Coordinator, Safety Task Force
Brotherhood Of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

DON CRAINE, Superintendent, Keystone Division
Norfolk Southern Railway

ERVIN WHITE, Motive Power and Equipment Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

PAUL HULBURT, Road Foreman, Keystone Division
Norfolk Southern Railway

JARED CASSITY, Alternate National Legislative
Director/Chief of Safety
SMART Transportation Division

LARRY ROSS, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

I N D E X

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Interview of Aaron Brown:	
By Mr. Skolnekovich	5
By Mr. Zagata	13
By Mr. White	14
By Mr. Cassity	14
By Mr. Ross	17
By Mr. Skolnekovich	18

I N T E R V I E W

(12:58 p.m.)

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3 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay, my name is Richard Skolnekovich, I'm
4 an NTSB operations investigator. We're conducting an interview on
5 May 13th, 2023, with -- what was your name?

6 MR. BROWN: Aaron Brown.

7 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Aaron Brown, who works for Norfolk
8 Southern. This interview is in conjunction with the NTSB's
9 investigation of the accident in New Castle, Pennsylvania. The
10 reference number is RRD23FR011. The purpose of this investigation
11 is to increase safety, not to assign fault or blame or liability.
12 Before we begin the interview, we're going to go around and
13 introduce ourselves. We'll spell out our name and title. I'll
14 start off and will pass it to my right. Once again, my name is
15 Richard Skolnekovich, that's S-k-o-l-n-e-k-o-v-i-c-h, NTSB
16 operations investigator.

17 MR. ZAGATA: Zach Zagata, Z-a-g-a-t-a, NTSB IIC.

18 MR. BROWN: Aaron Brown, A-a-r-o-n B-r-o-w-n, conductor,
19 Norfolk Southern.

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

22 MR. CRAINE: Don Craine, C-r-a-i-n-e, NS Keystone Division
23 superintendent.

24 MR. WHITE: Ervin White, W-h-i-t-e, FRA motive power and
25 equipment inspector, IIC.

1 MR. HULBURT: Paul Hulburt, H-u-l-b-u-r-t, NS Keystone
2 Division road foreman.

3 MR. CASSITY: Jared Cassity, C-a-s-s-i-t-y -- excuse me --
4 with SMART Transportation Division. Sorry, Larry.

5 MR. ROSS: Larry Ross, FRA OP, Pittsburgh area. R-o-s-s.

6 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. All right. You're aware it's being
7 recorded today and we have your permission to record this?

8 MR. BROWN: Yeah.

9 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. And you understand this is going to
10 get transcribed and it will go into a public docket so in the
11 future the public will be able to read it?

12 MR. BROWN: Correct.

13 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay.

14 INTERVIEW OF AARON BROWN

15 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

16 Q. All right. Now, to get started, can you give us a little bit
17 of background about your railroad career?

18 A. Sixteen years a conductor, engineer, worked all over the
19 place. I qualified on about 1600 miles of rail at one time, as a
20 conductor. About it.

21 Q. What area did you first hire out at?

22 A. Conductor in Youngstown, Ohio.

23 Q. Youngstown?

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. The territory that we're looking at, have you operated on it

1 before?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. How much do you think?

4 A. Daily. Out of the 16 years, probably 14 years total in the
5 Youngstown territory.

6 Q. Okay. And you've operated on that line pretty frequently?

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about the day that we're
9 looking at, just what you recall?

10 A. It was a typical day, we had maybe a hundred and -- a hundred
11 and 20 cars, a hundred and 30 cars to take from Youngstown to
12 Conway. Everything went pretty smooth. There was a 15M coming
13 into Youngstown behind us, we took the freight down and they had
14 to set an engine off. We were ahead of them, we talked to them,
15 and the dispatcher told them that they were going to wait on the
16 14M, so we went ahead, smooth trip.

17 Went all the way to West Conway, where we stopped and had
18 like a traffic jam ahead of us and we were just sitting there, the
19 14M was beside us and I commented, I said -- I asked them how -- I
20 said how big is this thing? They said roughly 12,000 feet. And
21 we joked about, you know, how big it was and we sat there and they
22 got going, and we're just sitting there talking and waiting and
23 talking and waiting and a couple trains went by us on the Fort
24 Wayne line and then we heard, faintly, like a hot, hot wheel
25 detector critical alarm, but it was real faint and it seemed like

1 it was real distant, far away, we only heard it one time. I told
2 everyone to be quiet, you know, someone just got a hot axle or
3 something, and we were joking because we just had to put the
4 freight in the yard and go back light and we thought, you know,
5 how -- if it's on our line, how's that going to affect us trying
6 to get home. And then I think we even joked about, you know, as
7 big as that train was, maybe having to bring part of it back to
8 Conway or whatever, if that was the case, a hot wheel or whatever.

9 We had a trainee, we were trying to explain to him about the
10 -- you know, hot wheel, you can rebroadcast, the engineer
11 rebroadcast and it picked up the detector at 30.5, which I thought
12 was kind of funny, it was loud and clear and we said well, it's
13 not there, maybe it's down at Leets on the other end of Conway,
14 you know, it seemed far away, it was real faint when it had went
15 off originally. So we just kind of like -- you know, we talked
16 about it wasn't 30.5.

17 I go well, maybe it wasn't that 14M and the trainee actually
18 got his MTR out, device, and looked at, you know, the train speed
19 and the train and he goes well, they're still moving but it shows
20 them going kind of slow and they're still moving. I go well, it
21 wasn't the 14M, must be down at Leets or somewhere else. And then
22 we just kind of blew it -- I mean, we started work and started
23 moving ahead a little bit and there was no more talk about it
24 until we were ready to go home and then they said they didn't know
25 what they were going to do with us because 14M was having some

1 troubles and I said troubles, like you need us, you know, to help
2 or -- and they were like no, I don't think there's anything you
3 can do, you know, and then they ran us up behind the 14M all the
4 way to Castle to try and -- they were going to drag some cars back
5 south and we ended up outlawing out there and that's about it.

6 Q. So when you heard the critical alarm, about what milepost
7 were you at?

8 A. We were at West Conway, so it's 24.6, maybe, something in
9 there.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. In between West Conway and Rochester because we had a stop
12 signal, so we stopped somewhere in there.

13 Q. Okay. How many alarms -- so how many radio messages did you
14 actually hear? So you heard the -- you started to hear the
15 critical alarm and then --

16 A. Yeah, we heard the critical alarm, I told everyone to be
17 quiet and I said it will go off again, you know, it usually does
18 it twice, and it was only the once that I heard it and then we
19 heard no other radio chatter, there was no dispatcher, nobody
20 toning anyone up, and so that's why we thought maybe it's so far
21 away, we can just get bits and pieces of it. But we were roughly
22 6 miles from that detector and 6 miles from the 30.5 and when he
23 rebroadcasted, it came in plain as day 30.5, no defects, like
24 plain as day, like the detector was sitting right beside us. So
25 we just kind of ruled out that it was 91.9 or whatever it is, we

1 just kind of ruled that out and thought that maybe it was east,
2 you know, and wouldn't affect us whatsoever. But yeah, I heard it
3 once and it was very faint, it broke up and that's it.

4 Q. Did you hear any other wayside messages prior to the
5 critical?

6 A. No, no wayside. No, I didn't hear anything.

7 Q. Did you hear any -- like, how was the traffic on the road, as
8 far as the radio traffic, were you hearing a lot?

9 A. There was just a couple, I think there was -- there was a 258
10 and a 259, one of them goes east and one of them goes west, I
11 think, and they had went by. We thought that might be them, but
12 then it said no defects. And I think they may have -- they
13 rebroadcast it, too, I think it did it twice, two separate times,
14 because maybe they thought it was them, also, and no defects on
15 that, so --

16 Q. So you heard the 30.5 defect message twice?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. About how long a time frame between the two?

19 A. Thirty seconds.

20 Q. Okay, so right after each other?

21 A. Um-hum.

22 Q. But you only heard the critical alarm portion that one time?

23 A. One time, very faint, broke up.

24 Q. Okay. And did you get any information out or did you just
25 hear critical alarm, but did it give the axle count or --

1 A. I didn't hear an axle count at all.

2 Q. Milepost or anything like that?

3 A. No. No, because that's why we were wondering, we didn't know
4 what milepost, if it would affect us, you know, how soon we were
5 going to get back home. We thought we had a relatively easy day,
6 drop the cars off at Conway, nothing to pick up, come home light,
7 we were going to be right behind them and then we were wondering
8 if they were going to run us or the 15M south first or, you know,
9 we were trying to figure it out, you know.

10 Q. So now the message itself, was it just staticky or was it
11 just faint or both?

12 A. Both, kind of faint and staticky, like it was 15 miles away.

13 Q. Okay. Can you kind of voice out what you actually heard,
14 like repeat it?

15 A. I thought I heard something about hot, hot axle, hot wheel,
16 you know, critical alarm, something, and that was it and that's
17 why we were so -- we were like man, where was that at, you know,
18 what train, I hope it's not that 14M because it was so big and
19 that's about it.

20 Q. So the 30.5 message, did it sound like the normal -- have you
21 heard that --

22 A. Oh, yeah.

23 Q. -- that one before?

24 A. Daily, yeah.

25 Q. Did it sound the same?

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. Okay, the message wasn't changed at all?

3 A. No, 30.5 was loud and clear.

4 Q. Okay. And did it give like a timetable or milepost?

5 Timetable direction, sorry.

6 A. No, I don't -- I don't remember that part.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. Track whatever, you know, it usually says the track number,

9 Track 1, Track 2, but --

10 Q. Yeah.

11 A. -- I don't even recall which main they were on.

12 Q. But the 30.5 sounded the same as normal?

13 A. Oh, yeah.

14 Q. And then with the critical alarm, hot box, did it start off

15 -- you know, how did it start, what did you hear when it started

16 off?

17 A. We were talking, like I said, we were talking and I could

18 faintly hear it, I go shut up, everyone, listen. You know,

19 somebody --

20 Q. Yeah.

21 A. Because really, at that point, I was like oh, man, you know,

22 it broke down in front of us, we're never going to get home --

23 Q. Yeah.

24 A. -- you know, or are we, are we going to have to help them or,

25 you know, there goes our night, basically. But we were talking, I

1 told the trainee and the engineer to shut up and listen and by
2 that time it was over, it never rebroadcast, it never did it a
3 second time. And I know, like we had just went over that detector
4 probably 35 to 40 minutes prior to that and it was loud and
5 clear --

6 Q. Yeah.

7 A. -- you know, but we were a hundred and 20 cars, they were 200
8 and some, you know, we were already 6 miles past that point, you
9 know, I don't know.

10 Q. You're talking about 30.5 was loud and clear when you guys
11 went over it?

12 A. No, 91.9.

13 Q. Or 91.9.

14 A. Yeah.

15 Q. Okay, 91.9 was loud and clear?

16 A. Yeah, yes.

17 Q. From the time you heard it, did you get -- you guys tried to
18 rebroadcast it, right?

19 A. Um-hum.

20 Q. About how long from the time you heard the critical alert
21 until you guys punched in the rebroadcast?

22 A. Maybe a minute or so.

23 Q. A minute or so.

24 A. It was very long, yeah.

25 Q. Okay. And I don't suppose you know about what time that was,

1 do you?

2 A. No. We were on duty at 6:00. Maybe 10, 10 to 11 o'clock,
3 somewhere in that -- I don't know specific.

4 Q. Okay. Do you guys record signals, stuff, when you're moving
5 up and down the road, and times?

6 A. No.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. No, I was trying to think if the trainee did, but he -- well,
9 no. Actually, I was writing -- I was trying to -- I'm in charge
10 of the trainees in Youngstown, so the head training coordinator
11 asked me or sent me an e-mail, he's trying to make a list of
12 signals, switches, sidings, mileposts, you know, like a cheat
13 sheet for these new guys and I was actually writing down the
14 mileposts, the signal mileposts with the PTC, to the decimal
15 point, the entire way down there, but I never put a time or
16 anything on it, so I --

17 MR. Skolnekovich: Okay. I have no further questions.

18 BY MR. ZAGATA:

19 Q. Zach Zagata, NTSB. That detector at 91, can you normally
20 hear that from Conway or like where you were sitting?

21 A. I'm not positive. Usually, if we -- I do know you can hear
22 it from Bright because we usually will park right there and you
23 can hear it, which would only be 2 miles away, roughly, but I
24 don't -- I can't recall being at West Conway hearing that
25 detector. I can't say for sure.

1 MR. ZAGATA: Okay, I appreciate it. That's all I've got.

2 MR. FRANSEN: Fransen, BLET, I don't have any questions at
3 this time, Aaron.

4 MR. CRAINE: Craine, NS, no questions at this time.

5 BY MR. WHITE:

6 Q. White, FRA. You said you've run this territory for a number
7 of years. Have you ever had other occasions where you've had
8 issues with the detector, hearing it, a dead zone?

9 A. No. No.

10 Q. I'll give you an odd ball question, have you heard other
11 unique, uncharacteristic communications over the radio traveling
12 through that area?

13 A. No. No.

14 MR. WHITE: Thank you.

15 MR. HULBURT: Paul Hulburt, NS, no questions.

16 BY MR. CASSITY:

17 Q. Jared Cassity, just a couple here, Aaron. I think you said
18 this earlier, but I'm going to ask you again because I'm
19 forgetful. You heard the critical alarm, but you didn't hear an
20 intro to 91.9, is that correct?

21 A. That's correct.

22 Q. And when you heard the critical alarm, did you hear a close
23 announcement or anything?

24 A. No.

25 Q. Okay. So literally, the only thing you heard was a very

1 faint critical alarm?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. Did you hear 14M on the radio at all, by chance?

4 A. No, they called the signal at Bright, they were sitting at
5 Bright when we went by. So once we cleared West Conway or once we
6 cleared Bright, they started moving and I think we were at
7 Rochester when I saw their train just kept going and going and I
8 go holy crap, you know, like does this thing ever end? And then I
9 saw an engine and I go oh, it's a rear engine DP.

10 And then there was more cars after that and I go -- I mean,
11 it was interlocking to interlocking and I go -- I asked, I said
12 how long are you guys and the conductor goes oh, 12,000 and some
13 feet and the engineer goes oh, we're about from here to there and
14 I go to this guy, you know -- I go, what a dork, you know?

15 And then they kept going and I do recall, I heard them at
16 some point, so they were pulling at Bright and they toned the
17 dispatcher up and said that they wouldn't fit in Youngstown, like
18 to make their moves, I think they were worried about the 15M
19 getting south, he said something about I don't think we'll fit and
20 then she goes, roger, and that was it. And then they were on
21 their way, we were going signal to signal, the cab signal kept
22 dropping and we were doing that and then we finally got stopped at
23 West Conway and that's when we heard the thing and we had no idea
24 until they told us, you know, an hour or two later, but --

25 Q. You didn't hear anything abnormal with their radio, though,

1 it sounded normal when you were talking?

2 A. Yeah, when they pulled, but like I said, they may have been
3 talking to the dispatcher at Bright, which would've been 2 miles
4 closer to us.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. But like I said, I don't -- from West Conway, 6 miles, I
7 can't recall what it sounds like from previous trips, you know.
8 Usually there's nobody there to go north or nobody right behind us
9 to come south and we're at West Conway, so I can't.

10 Q. And then the last question I have is about the size of that
11 train, pretty abnormal for that territory?

12 A. Yeah, yeah. I mean, seldom are they that big. Occasionally,
13 but not very often.

14 Q. From your experience, does the length of the train, has it
15 ever impacted in an adverse way your ability to hear a defect
16 detector communicate?

17 A. I think trains that are that long, I think possibly, I don't
18 have any facts, but I know it does mess with your EOT. Like if
19 you're going under a bridge and it's that long, maybe it won't
20 communicate and you'll lose communication on your marker on the
21 rear, just because of the distance, you're going under two
22 bridges, GPS signal. I can't really -- I don't have any examples
23 or instances where, you know, it affects the detectors or
24 whatever.

25 MR. CASSITY: Fair enough, I appreciate it. No further

1 questions.

2 BY MR. ROSS:

3 Q. Yeah, Ross, FRA. Just a couple here. On a northbound train,
4 we've heard that, you know, communication and listening down
5 around the Bright area, how's the radio communication in general,
6 if not just a defect detector, does the signal start to fade as
7 you go further north? Whether it's --

8 A. Oh, yeah.

9 Q. -- a defect detector?

10 A. Yeah.

11 Q. I mean, do you have any kind of distance issues with hearing
12 communications? Or maybe if you set the detector off at 91.9
13 sometimes.

14 A. Yeah. I don't have any facts, but at that point it fades to
15 where you can't even hear them or you'll just hear, you know,
16 crack-crack-crack (ph.), you can tell that somebody's out there
17 but you're too far away.

18 Q. Yeah.

19 A. And I don't have a --

20 Q. Any idea how far north, 2 miles, 3?

21 A. I don't know.

22 Q. Halfway to Hazelton or --

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. Just shooting from the hip.

25 A. I would say maybe 5 miles, because I've been up on a couple

1 secondary and heard trains coming up the Youngstown line and at
2 92, roughly where the detector's at, you can hear some static and
3 then when they get to 84 it's loud and clear. So I would say
4 maybe 4, 5, 6 miles we start to lose, lose communication.

5 MR. ROSS: Okay, thank you.

6 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

7 Q. I'll follow up on his last question, is that pretty common in
8 there or just from time to time?

9 A. No, it's pretty common, I mean, it does -- it does break up.
10 I mean, there's, you know, just -- I don't know why, it's just the
11 distance. And I don't know how the radio things are set up. I
12 mean, when they -- when they tone us up from Atlanta, you can hear
13 them plain as day and then if they're on the wrong base, you can't
14 hear anything, you know, you just hear static. So I don't know
15 how that works, but yeah, you definitely lose transmission
16 somewhere in there.

17 Q. Okay. Sorry, Richard Skolnekovich. One last thing, did you
18 hear any conversation between the crew and dispatch after the
19 critical alarm?

20 A. No, I heard no wayside, I heard no dispatcher. No.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. And like I said, with the distance from the dispatcher,
23 usually, I mean, they can get a hold of us or they can get a hold
24 of him anywhere in there, their radio is that loud. And I believe
25 wayside probably would be the same way, they could reach any train

1 on the system at any time and I never heard anything, no
2 dispatcher, nothing.

3 Q. Okay. So running in that territory, just from your own past
4 experience, you can always hear dispatchers?

5 A. Oh, yeah.

6 Q. You've never had any problems? Okay.

7 A. Yeah. And if it is broke up, you tell them to try a
8 different base and then they come in loud and clear.

9 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. I have no more follow-up questions.
10 We'll go around the room one more time just for follow-up.

11 MR. ZAGATA: Zach Zagata, NTSB, no additional questions.

12 MR. FRANSEN: Brian Fransen, BLET, no additional questions
13 for him.

14 MR. CRAINE: Craine, NS, no questions. However, I just want
15 to take an opportunity to thank you for your participation in
16 training our trainees, that's invaluable, and for that night, for
17 the folks in the cab and teaching the trainee not only how to
18 rebroadcast, but the importance of it and just your overall
19 participation in the process.

20 MR. BROWN: Thank you.

21 MR. CRAINE: That's all I've got, thanks.

22 MR. BROWN: Thanks.

23 MR. WHITE: White, FRA, no questions.

24 MR. HULBURT: Hulburt, NS, no questions.

25 MR. CASSITY: Cassity, SMART TD, no questions.

1 MR. ROSS: Ross, FRA, no questions.

2 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: And then, Aaron, do you have any last
3 thing you want to say or --

4 MR. BROWN: No.

5 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: -- anything you want to add to the --

6 MR. BROWN: No.

7 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. And the time is now 13:21 and that
8 concludes the interview.

9 (Whereupon, at 1:21 p.m., the interview concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

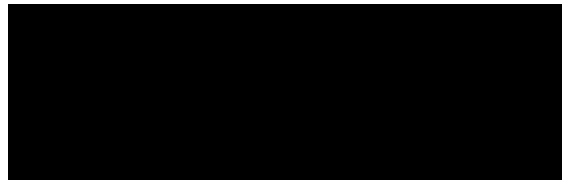
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: TRAIN DERAILMENT NEAR NEW CASTLE,
 PENNSYLVANIA ON MAY 10, 2023
 Interview of Aaron Brown

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD23FR011

DATE: May 13, 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.



Transcriber