

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

FIRE ABOARD SEPTA TRAIN NEAR THE *

CRUM LYNNE STATION IN RIDLEY PARK, *

PENNSYLVANIA ON FEBRUARY 6, 2025 *

Accident No.: RRD25FR006

* * * * *

Interview of: CHARLES MCCLAIN, Engineer

Southern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Saturday,
February 8, 2025

APPEARANCES:

MICHAEL BACHMEIER, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

TODD KRAHOLIK, Track Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

MAURICE LANDON
The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

LONNIE SWIGERT, Safety Task Force
The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

GREGORY MOSS
Sheet Metal Air Rail Transportation TDE

JOSHUA QUILLEN, Operating Practices
Federal Railroad Administration

CLARENCE HILLIARD, System Safety
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

SHANDEL WILLIAMS, System Safety
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

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I N T E R V I E W

(2:22 p.m.)

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3 MR. BACHMEIER: Good afternoon. My name is Michael
4 Bachmeier, and I am the NTSB Investigator-in-Charge for this
5 accident.

6 We are here today on February 8th at 2:22 in SEPTA
7 headquarters to conduct an interview with Charles McClain.

8 This interview's in conjunction with NTSB's investigation of
9 the accident near Crum Lynne. The NTSB Accident Reference Number
10 is RRD25FR006.

11 The purpose of the investigation is to increase safety, not
12 to assign fault, blame or liability.

13 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
14 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,
15 who you're representing and your title.

16 I'd like to remind everybody to speak clearly so we can get
17 an accurate recording.

18 I'll start off and then pass it to my right. Again, my name
19 is Michael Bachmeier. The spelling of my last name is
20 B-a-c-h-m-e-i-e-r, and I am the NTSB IIC for this accident.

21 MR. MCCLAIN: Charles McClain.

22 MR. BACHMEIER: The spelling of your last name.

23 MR. MCCLAIN: M-c-C-l-a-i-n.

24 MR. LANDON: Maurice Landon, L-a-n-d-o-n, representative,
25 BLET.

1 MR. SWIGERT: Lonnie Swigert, S-w-i-g-e-r-t, investigator,
2 BLET Safety Task Force.

3 MR. MOSS: Gregory Moss, M-o-s-s, representing SMART-TD.

4 MR. QUILLEN: Joshua Quillen, Q-u-i-l-l-e-n, FRA, Operating
5 Practices.

6 MS. WILLIAMS: Shandel Williams, W-i-l-l-i-a-m-s, assistant
7 safety officer, SEPTA.

8 MR. HILLIARD: Clarence Hilliard, H-i-l-l-i-a-r-d, SEPTA
9 safety officer.

10 MR. KRAHOLIK: Todd Kraholik, K-r-a-h-o-l-i-k. Track group
11 chairman for the NTSB.

12 MR. BACHMEIER: Thank you. And we do have a couple, a few
13 observers.

14 MS. SHAW: Stephanie Shaw, S-h-a-w, NTSB.

15 MR. PERKINS: Rob Perkins, SEPTA Operations, P-e-r-k-i-n-s.

16 MR. WILLIAMS: Terrance Williams, W-i-l-l-i-a-m-s, SEPTA
17 Operations, transportation manager.

18 MR. MCDANIEL: Kenneth Mcdaniel, M-c-d-a-n-i-e-l. FRA,
19 signal, train control inspector.

20 MR. BACHMEIER: Thank you. Do we have your permission to
21 record our discussion with you today, Charles?

22 MR. MCCLAIN: Yes.

23 MR. BACHMEIER: Do you understand the transcripts will be
24 part of the public docket, as such, we cannot guarantee any
25 confidentiality?

1 MR. MCCLAIN: Yes.

2 MR. BACHMEIER: As we discussed, you have a representative
3 with you today, Mr. Landon, is that correct?

4 MR. MCCLAIN: Yes.

5 MR. BACHMEIER: I'd like to ask everyone to clearly announce
6 your name and title before questioning.

7 Let's proceed.

8 INTERVIEW OF CHARLES MCCLAIN

9 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

10 Q. Charles, could you give a synopsis of your work experience
11 taking us up to your present job?

12 A. I started in 1990 as assistant conductor for a couple years
13 then I was trained as a conductor a couple years. Then I trained
14 as an engineer since '94 to the present.

15 Q. Now are you on a regular job?

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. What's your regular job?

18 A. I work -- run 4:04 out of West Trenton. I do a couple trips
19 a day with a layover in the middle or more like at the beginning.

20 Q. Okay. Back on February 6th, could you give us a summary of
21 your day prior to handing off to the outbound crew.

22 A. We took the train out of Powelton. We leave there at 1:21.
23 We usually get Gs, go light, getting Gs usually Gs we get on out
24 never very good.

25 So we took that train, six cars up to West Trenton. We

1 usually have five. That day for some reason I think we had six.

2 Anyway, the train wasn't running as well as it should have.
3 It took a while to get up to track speed. You had to be -- we
4 needed distance to get the track speed, but we got there.

5 We changed ends, did tests, brakes tests, left at 3:18 p.m.

6 But going in town, the train wasn't running as well as it did
7 going out, and it became to be sluggish. As we went down the
8 branch, I felt I needed to report this because this train was
9 going to Amtrak territory which is a higher speed than what we do.

10 And I reported that, you know, it's not doing well on our
11 territory which is a max 70 where I'm at. It's not going to do
12 well at a max 90. So, I reported that.

13 We made a stop at Bethayres to pick up an ADA passenger.
14 He's usually a rider at least once a week. Picked him up and
15 that's where I started smelling this odor.

16 Called it in. I didn't call in the odor because that was
17 new. I said, well, maybe it's the area, maybe it's something
18 else, I don't -- it is an unfamiliar smell.

19 So, put we him on, we go down the branch and -- because I
20 reported the sluggishness in the train already, and I called a
21 dispatcher again on SEPTA 2 to ask if there was any plans for this
22 equipment.

23 He said they'd get back to me. They got back to me and told
24 me Mechanical was going to meet me at the hole in the fence.

25 Okay.

1 So, we get down to the hole in the fence, and I purposely
2 stopped the train where they were because -- and when they got on,
3 I said look, I want you to smell what I smell because I don't know
4 what this is. They, you know, one of the guys, he sniffed around,
5 and he thought that, well, he told me it could be the cleaning
6 products. And I said okay.

7 MR. KRAHOLIK: I'm sorry, it could be what?

8 MR. MCCLAIN: Cleaning products that they use.

9 MR. KRAHOLIK: All right, I gotcha. Sorry about that.

10 MR. MCCLAIN: So, I don't think he thought that after he
11 walked through the train because I thought the smell was only
12 where I'm at.

13 Apparently, it was inside the cars, the car as well because
14 the crew came up and told me that we smell something. And I said
15 in it's here too because I was shocked.

16 So, the Mechanical, they went through the train. I don't
17 know what they did. I stayed where I'm at to monitor the radio.

18 After a few minutes in time that they were doing whatever
19 they do, the conductor came up and told me they got off. I said,
20 they got off and what's wrong. And he told me it was, they said
21 it's three bad cars with a bad motor, I don't know what that
22 means.

23 So, I relayed that information to the dispatcher, and the
24 first thing I was told, are you on the move. So, I had to clarify
25 that again because I called them back and asked for permission to

1 go south even after I told them what was wrong with the equipment.
2 They said, okay, proceed south.

3 Took the train down at Suburban, had a job briefing with my
4 relief, told him what they told me. I said, I tried my best to
5 get this swapped out, it did not happen.

6 So he took it. He said, you know, he took it and that was
7 it.

8 MR. BACHMEIER: Thank you. Lonnie, I'm going to pass it
9 right off to you.

10 MR. SWIGERT: All right. Just give me one second. I got to
11 catch up here.

12 MR. BACHMEIER: Yeah, no problem.

13 MR. SWIGERT: All right. Mr. McClain, thanks for coming in
14 today. This is Lonnie Swigert, BLET Safety Task Force. I only
15 had one or two questions for you.

16 One was, okay, you said Bethayres, that's when you first
17 noticed the odor, but you thought maybe it wasn't nothing, you
18 didn't really mention it then, you told them it was sluggish at
19 that point. And then later on, you did tell them about the odor?

20 MR. MCCLAIN: Yeah. Well I knew the guys were going on so
21 they could check out the odor.

22 MR. SWIGERT: I think that's it for me for right now. Thank
23 you.

24 MR. MOSS: Gregory Moss, TD. Good afternoon, Mr. McClain.

25 BY MR. MOSS:

1 Q. You said that you purposely stopped the train when the
2 mechanic was getting on the train?

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. You explained to them what you had smelled?

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. They walk, I guess, a couple cars into the train. Did you
7 ever see them again after that?

8 A. After they left the first car, I didn't see them anymore.

9 Q. So you just had that one conversation?

10 A. That's it.

11 MR. MOSS: Thank you, Mr. McClain. No more questions.

12 MR. QUILLEN: Joshua Quillen, FRA.

13 The smell, was it like overwhelming where it really bothered
14 you?

15 Is there a rule that you guys have if, you know, you're not
16 supposed to take it if it's really bad?

17 MR. MCCLAIN: Yeah. It wasn't to that point. If it was to
18 that point, I would have said, look, this is -- you can't take
19 this anymore. I mean, nobody complained that it was bothering
20 them, but I just smelled something that was very unfamiliar to me.

21 MR. QUILLEN: Okay. That's all I had.

22 MS. WILLIAMS: Shandel Williams. Thank you, Mr. Charles, God
23 bless you.

24 MR. MCCLAIN: Thank you.

25 BY MS. WILLIAMS:

1 Q. So, when you guys got the train out of Powelton and this is
2 your first train of the day, right?

3 A. No. This is my second.

4 Q. Your second train of the day?

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. Did you notice anything coming out of the yard, like a smell
7 or a sluggishness?

8 A. No.

9 Q. So when did the sluggishness become apparent to you?

10 A. Coming south.

11 Q. Oh, coming south.

12 A. Coming south. It never ran optimal, but it ran worse going
13 south.

14 Q. Right, because going north, you had the 288, right?

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. Coming south, you had the 13 --

17 A. The 132.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. It seemed like the 132 was doing all the work because I was
20 looking at the gauge, and it was down, I mean, usually you
21 don't -- six cars, it's not supposed to be working that hard.

22 But I could tell something -- these two, this married pair
23 was doing the work.

24 Q. And when you -- you said you didn't report the odor, but you
25 reported the sluggishness, was that at Bethayres as well when you

1 got the ADA?

2 A. The odor?

3 Q. No, the sluggishness.

4 A. Oh, the sluggishness started going down the branch.

5 Q. Right, did you report it though?

6 A. I reported it on the -- when I got there, I said, this isn't
7 getting any better and this is not going to make it, at that
8 point, this is not going to make it.

9 I wanted to give them enough time to get enough -- get some
10 other equipment, get a crew, get another (indiscernible) so it's
11 ready for us when we get down there.

12 Q. And you report -- so you reported the sluggishness around
13 when, when you guys left West Trenton?

14 A. We were on our way to Bethayres when I reported it, and then
15 I saw this guy and then I said, oh, I got to make this stop, you
16 know, while I'm talking on the radio.

17 MS. WILLIAMS: Okay. That's it for me.

18 MR. HILLIARD: Clarence Hilliard, System Safety.

19 In your experience, like, when you're having equipment
20 problems, you report it to the Control Center, what's the typical
21 response? Is it typically take it through or swap it out? Just
22 in your experience.

23 MR. MCCLAIN: It's either/or, you know. Lately, it's been
24 taking it, take it through.

25 They did swap me out last week when I got sick on a train. I

1 threw up everywhere so they did swap that out. But this one, they
2 didn't so it's for different things.

3 MR. HILLIARD: It just depends?

4 MR. MCCLAIN: Yeah.

5 MR. HILLIARD: Thank you. That's all I have.

6 MR. KRAHOLIK: Todd Kraholik with the NTSB.

7 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

8 Q. So when you were coming south, did you pass any trains coming
9 south?

10 A. Yeah, we did have a meet. We usually have a meet around
11 Woodbourne. I think he was a little later that day; he was a
12 little later.

13 Q. And did he say there was anything wrong with your train when
14 you passed him?

15 A. No.

16 Q. Did he tell you your train was good or bad or just didn't say
17 anything?

18 A. Didn't say anything.

19 Q. Okay, gotcha. And you get a train out of Powelton, where did
20 you get -- did you get it out of the shop, or was it in a track
21 around the shop?

22 A. They don't have a shop.

23 Q. Under your understanding, was this the first time this
24 train's had a move for the day out of Powelton?

25 A. No, because the air slip was -- came out of Frazer.

1 Q. And Frazer is an Amtrak yard?

2 A. Yeah, it's on Amtrak territory.

3 Q. Right. But when you got on the train, you didn't get a job
4 briefing from anybody else, you just saw the break slip on the
5 train and you left? You didn't speak to --

6 A. Well, I go to the yard master before I get on that train
7 every day. I go there first. I don't have to, but I do.

8 And I talked to him, I said, what we got is, you know, I
9 said, can you please give me something else because the
10 equipment's old and it -- it's old. And it's usually not very
11 good.

12 If I get the Vs, I know I'll be on time. We only have two,
13 got two crew members on there, and we can keep the train on time,
14 but we don't usually do Vs.

15 Q. I'm not familiar, I'm sorry. What does Vs mean?

16 A. Oh Silverliner Vs. I'm sorry.

17 Q. So that's a series of cars?

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. Right. So when they told you the train car numbers, you knew
20 they were Silverliner IVs and knew they were John (indiscernible)?

21 A. Yeah, you said it.

22 Q. I didn't mean to use that (indiscernible).

23 (Asides.)

24 MR. MCCLAIN: I'm going to have some kind of issues going
25 with it.

1 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

2 Q. Right, just because of the numbers of the cars?

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. Not the train number, but the car number?

5 A. Car numbers, yeah.

6 Q. Okay. And when the yard master gave you your, I'm going to
7 it job briefing, and you asked for something else, at any point
8 did he tell you anything was wrong with those cars, or did he say
9 they're supposed to be good or -- nothing like that, that you can
10 recall?

11 A. No.

12 Q. So you said the odor was something you normally don't smell,
13 would you consider it a smoke smell or a burning smell --

14 A. No.

15 Q. -- or just something you've never smelled?

16 A. It wasn't burning. We didn't see any indication of any smoke
17 anywhere. It was just something that I hadn't smelled before, and
18 it didn't smell like it was burning, because if it was burning, I
19 would have known.

20 If I felt it was burning, I would have known, but I didn't --
21 it was just unfamiliar. I never smelled that before.

22 Q. I gotcha. When you told the dispatcher that it wasn't
23 running right, did you tell him you needed a Mechanical to look at
24 it, is that how the conversation went?

25 A. No. I don't -- that's not my call. They made that call to

1 have Mechanical meet me at the hole in the fence. I was trying to
2 get the train swapped out.

3 Q. So did you -- you knew you were going to stop at the hole in
4 the fence? They told you to stop --

5 A. They told me after I called them a second time to ask them if
6 they had any plans for this equipment. I called them around,
7 before we got to Jenkintown, and I said, what's the plans or what
8 plans do you guys have for this equipment. And I was told that
9 they'd get back to me.

10 They did momentarily, told me that Mechanical's going to meet
11 me at the hole in the fence, and I said, okay, a dog and pony
12 show.

13 Q. I gotcha. You said that, I'm going to go back, you said when
14 you were going north to Trenton, it wasn't running optimal, but it
15 wasn't terrible, but when you were coming south, it was that much
16 of a difference, you felt like it was night and day, completely
17 different?

18 A. It just got worse.

19 Q. As far as max speed or getting to max speed, what do you mean
20 by getting worse?

21 A. The take-off speed, the acceleration, it was -- it got
22 slower, it got slower, you know, the take, from the stop.

23 Before it, you know, it got a little bit, a little bit -- but
24 at that -- as I kept going, it just got worse. I would put in P3
25 just to get it to go, and P3 is max.

1 Q. I was going to follow up with that question. So you had to
2 put it in P3 to get it to --

3 A. I had to put in P3.

4 MR. KRAHOLIK: That's all I have right now.

5 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. Following up with that.

6 So if you had the V series, what would you start out at,
7 start out in five, or P3 also?

8 MR. MCCLAIN: Oh, no. No, Vs have very good takeoff, very
9 good takeoff.

10 MR. BACHMEIER: In the Vs, you need to get up to P3 just to
11 get to track speed, or you can --

12 MR. MCCLAIN: To get up to 70, yeah. But you gradually, you
13 don't just jump into it.

14 MR. BACHMEIER: Lonnie.

15 MR. SWIGERT: I'm trying to find where I was at there.

16 You were talking earlier that you could -- you felt like the
17 132 and 131 was doing all the work, and you could just -- were you
18 talking about amp gauge?

19 MR. MCCLAIN: Yeah.

20 MR. SWIGERT: Okay. I think that's all I have. Thank you.

21 MR. MOSS: No further questions.

22 MR. QUILLEN: Josh Quillen, FRA. No questions.

23 MS. WILLIAMS: No questions.

24 MR. HILLIARD: Clarence Hilliard, System Safety. Just one
25 more question.

1 You mentioned dog and pony show when they said mechanics
2 would meet you, is that like typically when you meet mechanics, do
3 they resolve your issues, do they give you -- is that, like, an
4 effective strategy, I guess, for solving mechanical issues, like,
5 while your train's in motion.

6 MR. MCCLAIN: That term, I got from a mechanic that met my
7 train years ago.

8 MR. HILLIARD: Okay. I think that's all I have.

9 MR. KRAHOLIK: Todd Kraholik with the NTSB. I just want to
10 go to Bachmeier, one of his questions.

11 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

12 Q. So when you get on the train, you put it in forward or
13 reverse and then to start it, you start in P1 or -- what are your
14 notches?

15 A. It's off coast.

16 Q. So it would be --

17 A. Yeah. You want to get a little roll before you start taking
18 power so it doesn't jerk. On the IVs, you can do that. You take
19 a little power, get a little roll then you can go. But, you know,
20 if I'm coming out of the yard, I don't do that. If I'm on the
21 road, that's how you start.

22 But this stuff, I'd put it, I'd get a little roll and then,
23 yeah, I just have to go to P3 and it's still moving like I got it
24 all up to off coast. And it took a while, it would take a while
25 to start to build up, some acceleration.

1 Q. So P3 would be the fourth notch, is that how it would -- how
2 many notches would it -- we use notches in the freight world.

3 So is there off coast, P1, P2, P3?

4 A. Yes.

5 MR. KRAHOLIK: Okay. That's all I have.

6 MR. BACHMEIER: Thank you, Todd.

7 Charles, do you have anything you would like to add?

8 MR. MCCLAIN: Just that the Silverliner IVs are just, they're
9 difficult to run because they just -- I don't know why they're not
10 -- I don't know if they're not maintained. I don't know. They
11 just -- you cringe when you get them.

12 When I first hired here, when we saw those Silverliner IVs,
13 we called them Cadillacs, but not anymore.

14 MR. BACHMEIER: They were the Cadillacs.

15 MR. MCCLAIN: They were Cadillacs.

16 MR. BACHMEIER: Now the Vs are the Cadillacs.

17 MR. MCCLAIN: Now Vs are the Cadillacs.

18 MR. BACHMEIER: If we have any follow-up questions, would you
19 mind if we contacted you?

20 MR. MCCLAIN: No problem.

21 MR. BACHMEIER: On behalf of the NTSB, thank you for your
22 time and cooperation and coming in to speak with this afternoon.

23 Thank you.

24 MR. MCCLAIN: No problem.

25 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

CERTIFICATE

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

IN THE MATTER OF: FIRE ABOARD SEPTA TRAIN NEAR THE
CRUM LYNNE STATION IN RIDLEY PARK,
PENNSYLVANIA ON FEBRUARY 6, 2025
Interview of Charles McClain

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD25FR006

PLACE: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

DATE: February 8, 2025

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.



Christina H. Neilson
Transcriber