

## **Three Mile Island Documentary Transcript (Excerpt ... the part generally shown in class)**

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The Film & More

### **Enhanced Transcript**

It was built on a sandbar called Three Mile Island, in the middle of Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River, just 10 miles downstream from the state capitol of Harrisburg. The plant's state-of-the-art Unit-2 reactor had been generating electricity for nearly a year.

#### **Mike Pintek**

##### **Reporter**

Three Mile Island was something you would go to the river and would say wow, look at that power plant, look at those big steam towers. I was just amazed, wide-eyed, looking at the thing and it was just kind of neat -- it was high technology and this was going to be power that was too cheap to meter.

People in the communities surrounding the plant had grown accustomed to the giant concrete fortress. For them, Wednesday, March 28, 1979 began like any other day.

They didn't yet know that events leading to the worst nuclear accident in American history had already been set in motion.

It started in the pre-dawn hours with a simple plumbing breakdown. Then a small valve opened to relieve pressure in the reactor. But unknown to the plant operators, it malfunctioned and failed to close. This in turn caused cooling water to drain from the open valve. The nuclear core began to overheat.

Technical failures were then compounded by human error. Confronted by baffling and contradictory readings, the operators shut off the emergency water system that would have cooled the core.

#### **Mike Gray**

##### **Writer**

If the operators had not intervened in that accident at Three Mile Island and shut off the pumps, the plant would have saved itself. They had thought of absolutely everything except what would happen if the operators intervened anyway.

#### **Mike Gray**

So the operators thought they were saving the plant by cutting off the emergency water when, in fact, they had just sealed its fate.

Within minutes, the control room console went wild. Hundreds of lights started flashing, accompanied by piercing horns and sirens. One operator recalled that the console was "lit up like a Christmas tree."

### **Jim Higgins**

#### **Nuclear Regulatory Commission**

There was such an avalanche of alarms that the operators couldn't really address any of those on a real time basis. They were just catching up and trying to -- trying to prioritize and handle the most important ones and do what they could.

### **Bob Long**

#### **Supervising Engineer**

There was so much data being dumped to the computer and the process was so slow in getting it analyzed and printed out, that when they'd go to look for data from their computer print-out, it wasn't there until an hour-and-a-half later.

By early morning, the exposed part of the core was beginning to cook. Temperatures in the reactor were already reaching 4,300 degrees. At 5,200 degrees -- meltdown -- a scenario called the "China Syndrome".

### **Mike Gray** **Writer**

The core could have turned into a molten white-hot mass, could have gone through the concrete base of the plant and into ground water which is immediately below the foundation of the plant, could have fractured the earth instantly in all directions and geysers of radioactive steam would have spouted, ah, into the air, ah, through the parking lots and a cloud of death would have wafted north over the City of Harrisburg.

Operators remained convinced that the core was covered and safe. No one in the control room could see that Three Mile Island was hurtling toward meltdown.

### **Bob Long** **Supervising Engineer**

Most of us who had spent our lives in this business didn't believe that could happen. We had a mindset that said we had these marvelous safety systems which had back-ups of back-ups..... So there was that mindset that I think made it hard for people to really come to grips with the reality that severe damage had occurred.

As the operators struggled to make sense of the accident, workers throughout the plant flocked to the control room.

### **Mike Gray** **Writer**

By 6:15 the control room must of had 50-60 people in it and more arriving every moment. Then they get the alarm "Radiation in the control room." Well, that's got to be a heart stopper.

Contaminated water from the open valve had leaked into an adjoining building and was releasing radioactive gases throughout the plant.

With radiation threatening to escape to surrounding communities, Supervisor Gary Miller

declared the first "general emergency" ever to arise at a nuclear power plant in the United States.

The operators, grabbing their respirators, would remain at the helm of the runaway reactor.

The radiation level inside the containment dome was reading 10,000 rems per hour -- a dose so high, only minutes of exposure would prove fatal.

For four hours, Three Mile Island had smoldered in silence. Shortly after 8:00 A.M., a local radio station began picking up the first hints of trouble.

### **Mike Pintek**

#### **Reporter**

We first learned that something was wrong at Three Mile Island because our traffic reporter, he's out driving around, and he says,

"You know, I'm getting things up on the scanners here, he said, are you picking this up? I said, I don't know what you're talking about. And he said, well, apparently they've mobilizing some fire equipment and emergency people at Three Mile Island.

And he said, oh by the way, there's no steam coming out of the cooling towers.

So now I'm thinking, hmm, something's really weird going on there.... I called Three Mile Island

o/c and the receptionist had been so harried that morning that she didn't know, she didn't listen to me. She just put me through to the control room. Now I hear all this commotion behind it, you know, in the background, there's a guy on the line I tell him who I am, and I ask him, is there fire equipment there? And he says, I can't talk now, we've got a problem. And boy, (Laughs), did they ever have a problem.

#### **RADIO BROADCAST:**

Announcer: "Okay, we have this news bulletin that we're gonna get on right now. Here's Mike Pintek."

Pintek: "Okay, thank you Jim."..."There is a general emergency at Metropolitan Edison Company's Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. A utility spokesman says there was a problem with a feedwater pump this morning..."

As word of the accident slowly leaked to the outside world, the Governor of Pennsylvania, Dick Thornburgh, learned the news from his aides.

### **Dick Thornburgh** **Governor**

The minute I heard that there had been an accident at a nuclear facility, I knew we were in another dimension.

Thornburgh immediately turned to Lieutenant Governor William Scranton III, chair of the state's emergency council.

### **William Scranton** **Lt. Governor**

There had never been anything like this.... it wasn't something you could see or feel or taste or

touch. We were talking about radiation, which generated an enormous amount of fear.

Three Mile Island's parent company, Metropolitan Edison or MET ED, told Scranton that no radiation had been detected off plant grounds.

#### SCRANTON PRESS CONFERENCE:

"The Metropolitan Edison Company has informed us that there has been an incident at Three Mile Island Unit number two. Everything is under control. There is and was no danger to public health and safety."

In his first statement to the press, the Lieutenant Governor confidently reiterated MET ED's assurances. He would soon learn that his confidence had been misplaced.

#### **William Scranton**

What I had said in the morning was, "There has been no significant offsite release," only to find out moments later that, in fact, there had been an offsite release... and the indignation that welled up within me in was memorable. I still haven't gotten over that.

It was at that point that I realized that we could not rely on Metropolitan Edison for the kind of information we needed to make decisions.

Early that afternoon, the national press began converging at Three Mile Island's Observation Center.

MET ED had never faced a public relations crisis like this. Unprepared for the media onslaught, they chose Jack Herbein, an engineer with no prior press experience, as their spokesman.

#### HERBEIN PRESS CONFERENCE

"The question was why didn't we notify the people. The accide--, the incident occurred uh, this morning around 4 o'clock. The safety systems functioned as they should have...."

#### **Gene Schenck Reporter**

In the first press conference, they were playing down the importance of what had happened in the plant. It was an incident, there was a problem, a valve leaked, the plant overheated, they had to shut the plant down and they were going to clean it up.

#### HERBEIN PRESS CONFERENCE

"Things are falling off right now as I've indicated. The coolant injection systems are functioning properly. And we expect soon to be in the cold shutdown condition." (Press asks questions....)

#### **Gene Schenck**

If you had gone home from that first press conference, you would have presumed that the problem would have been cleaned up overnight. I mean, that's the impression they gave us.

#### **Robert Reid Mayor**

I didn't buy it and there were quite a few other people that didn't buy it.

Radiation releases were of grave concern for Mayor Robert Reid. His community of Middletown

lay just up river from Three Mile Island.

**Robert Reid**

I remember a man by the name of Herbein. And when I asked him about the release and the time of the accident, he more or less looked at it from the standpoint of, "Mayor, you don't know anything about nuclear energy. I'm the expert."

**ROBERT REID PRESS INTERVIEW**

Reporter: "How dangerous did the power company tell you the situation was?"

Reid: "Well, I talked to a representative from the company and he assured me there was really nothing to be concerned about."

Reporter: "Are you satisfied with that answer? Or do you want some answers?"

Reid: "I think we will get better answers."

**Robert Reid**

I was angry from that Wednesday -- ah, in fact, I'm still angry. I just -- I was just upset with the way things were being handled and the way we were lied to.