

Don Goss

3/5/86

Tucker County

Rescues in the Boat

Michael: What is your full name?

Don: Donald Carl Goss.

Michael: And you told me you were born...

Don: Well I was born in a log camp...in Painter Run..

(family history....delete....not applicable to flood)

When the flood came up, I was sitting in the room here working a puzzle. It had been raining all day and I was sitting in there. Danny came in, my son, he said, "Dad, you know, we're going to get flooded." And I said, "Is the river up that high?" And he said, "Yeah, it's coming up pretty high." So I grabbed an umbrella, said I'd go over there and look. Hilda was going to go with me, but about that time, my daughter called her, and she had to get her umbrella and stuff....so I just went over to the river and I took one look at it and I said, "Yeah, we're going to catch a flood." So I came back, and when I came back, one of the emergency cars around and said the water was going to get high and we should go to the grade school. So I just stopped at my mother's who lives down between me and the river and I told her, to get her sweater on, to get her coat on and everything because we were going to have to get her out of there. I got her and Hilda went with my daughter; Jeanie picked her up. I took my mother up on the hill, at my cousins, Millers, up there above the manor. And I left her and I came right back and hooked my van to the boat, and Fred Stone, he took the little K-wagon I had. He took it up on the hill, I took the van and the boat, and went downtown. My brother Leo, lives right on the river, called me and he said, "I see you have your boat hooked up." He said, "what are you going to do?" I said, "I'm getting out of here Leo, we're going to get flooded." "Auh, it never did get in up here," he said. I said, "You better look around." By the time I'd left here and went up on the hill and came back to get my boat, the water was coming across the road down here, just at this next crossing. And I told him he didn't know it. He didn't know the water had come in behind him. It

had come across down here instead of coming through here at that time. So he hooked up his big trailer he has, a Wilderness trailer, and he came and his father-in-law and mother-in-law lives in a trailer next to him there. He went over there and told them and they didn't know the water was coming up like that. So they all took their trailer up on the hill and I took my boat up and I parked it. I parked it where I had left my mother. Hilda and Jeanie and their familythey were going to go up there, but the water had come down Pennsylvania Avenue and just about washed them off the avenue. They did get turned around and got back out, a bottled gas tank floated down and hit the side of the car, came down through that quick. But when they came back they went up to my sons' home on up above the Miller house, above the manor there, and they all went up there and I came around there to check on them again, and that was....well that was a lot later after a lot of things had happened. It was dark when a couple fellows walked up the road towards my son's house and they said, "Do you have that boat parked down there on the street?" and I said "Yeah." The fellows said, there's some old people trapped in a house in St. George, would you help get them out?" And I said, "Sure will. We'll try." And the fellow said, "Well, I'll go with you. I'll help you." And I said, "Where is that?" They said, "Right down at the bridge in St. George." I said, "I'll be right down." And by the time I got down there, the emergency cars were sitting there. And we started trying to get the boat. Well, our boat is heavy. And the water was up and where the little driveway comes up to the bridge, the guardrails and you had to put the boat right out in there where the swiftest water was, to try to get across the guardrail. So we tied a rope to it and some of the fellows got in clear up to their waist and pushed the boat out, got it up to the guardrail where we didn't have to lift it too far. And we got it across the guardrail on that side and then the fellow that came after me, I gave him a life jacket to put on and I told him when we went to leave, "Now if we hit something solid with this prop I don't know any way of getting out of here." See I didn't know if any trees were growing in that area or not. The water was going right through the bridge

then. I said, "If we're out there and we hit something," and the motor was off, the boat's going to the bridge, and we'd have to swim as hard as we can swim to get out. And I made one pass towards the house there, and the water came around the house. Because I wasn't going full speed. The boat had a 150 horse power engine on it. I was actually expecting to hit something when I was going through there. When I got hit with that swift water, it throwed me, and I had to make, come back around, and the next time then I gunned it. And I got across there and I got on the east side of the house where it was kind of calm in there, I got the boat right up against the side of the house up to the second story window, and I held the boat into a vent pipe, going right up to the roof there, and I held on to it. The other fellow had a hammer and he broke out the storm window. People were flashing a light inside so we knew where they were. And we broke out the storm window and tore the other window out. We got four of them on there. Mr. Cross, I hadn't seen him for years, in fact I thought he was dead. I'd known Bob years ago but when I worked away from here, daytime,.....he had one leg off. I think he was the first one. When they were getting through the window, I just pulled him right back on the boat, and covered him up with what we had. They were wet, and scared. So we took four of them that time, and I think a dog was in there, we took it in with that trip. But they told me before we went in there, there was a lady back in one of the rooms with a heart condition. I had to keep the boat into the house there, the other fellow, he had to go in by himself. We had a rope, we put in the window there and tied it to the bow of the boat, I'd hold the other part then I got a hold where the eave trough used to be. Went in this time, said I needed another man because we were going to have to carry the woman out. One fellow said, "I'll go with you." I said, "Can you swim?" And he said, "No, I can't." And I said, "You better not go then." Another fellow stepped up and he said, "Well, I can swim. I'll go." So I gave him one of those life cushions, I had two life jackets and two life cushions in there, I gave him one, I said, "You hang on to that if anything happens." So we went back to the house, when we got her out I put her on the seat beside me where I sit and I gave her my life jacket and they threw a blanket out of the house and I put it

around her. She said that she had a problem breathing. I told the fellow, "Well, I'm going to take her on in here." So I run her on in and we put her in the ambulance. And then when we come back the next time, I could see the water had raised.....it was clear up above the window then. Upstairs. The beds were floating. So when I came then I said, "Well, we'll just take everybody that's in there. And the two boys with me and the people, we had seven, the last time; we got them all. I was afraid the water would break through on the upper side of the house and it could have drowned them. That's why I was scared. Thought maybe the house would start breaking up. The water was coming around pretty swift. But the house is still standing there. It's a good house. A lot of repairs to do.

I came back to town, brought the boat back, I took it back up and we were going to park it in the same place. I had been around up on the one street see how the hill and the kids were, and I came back down, I was going to park on the next street, and a lady stopped me. She was talking to someone else, she had stopped another pickup truck to talk to them, so she stopped me and she asked me if I was part of the national guard. And I said, "No, I'm not with the national guard." Then she told me about her daughter missing. Down at Holly Meadows. I know she thought that the girl had drowned. She said that she was twenty years old, she can't swim. Said that they had, several hours earlier, her and her husband, when the jeep upset they looked around, and they didn't see her after that. I told her, I said, "Well, I don't have any light." In all the excitement, I didn't take motor battery which runs my light. I have a 300,000 candle-power light. It was sitting on the back porch with the battery charger. So I said, "It gets daylight, I'll go hunt for her." I made her that promise. Then I went down and parked across from the fire hall there, got back in the van, covered up with the blanket, I was wet. Everybody was wet. I started getting warm and someone flashed the light in. And it was Bloom, the game warden. And a couple fellows with him. And he said, there's people on a rooftop down at Holly Meadows, they can hear them hollering, and he asked me

if I'd take the boat down and try to get them. He said they didn't have any chance of getting any boats until later on that day. And this was in the middle of the night. I said, "If we get the boat in, we'll try to get them." So we got down about half way down the lane there in Holly Meadows about as far as we could get, and we had to man-handle the boat, got it in there. And the Humphrey boy, lives down there below town there, he says, "I'm going with you. I'm going to help you." And I said, "Well, I'll need help." And so we got down....they had a little hand light. And I heard the hollering. I flashed the light over and she was in the tree. Right where the swiftest water was. There was a piece of a house in the trees there and she was over from it. I knew if I'd run the motor right down into the tree I'd probably hit something...so there was a tree right up from it, and we had this rope that the emergency squad had. And I tied it on the bow of the boat even before we went out so we could get it out in the water, then I pulled the rope in. I told the Humphrey boy, "I'm going to get up next to that tree there, up above her, you snatch this rope around the tree, when I holler you let it off a little bit." The boy was strong. He grabbed that tree, the rope was in that swift part, and I thought he was going get away from it, he hugged that tree and he held on there, got the rope around it. And you know that rope went down there right under her feet where she was in the tree. And then I got her to... trying to get her to let go, got her hands loose, I got her down so she could put her foot....stand on top of the motor....and I got her on the boat. Of course then I gunned the boat. I told the boy "When I start coming up out of here, you let go the rope." So we went out, and then I was heading for shallow water. And I ran her aground up there in that field. I started digging into the mud. I told the girl, "You don't have to worry now. We can wade out from here. There won't be any swift water." Then those people they came down along the field and I threw them the rope. They got a hold of it and they pulled the boat and we got up and out. They took her and put her in the ambulance. I didn't know her. Here she had been up here with my granddaughter before. Then the lady, Mrs. Snyder, the

the one that had the heart problem, she died here, a few weeks ago. I didn't know who she was. But her son and I graduated together. He used to come up to my home and stay. And we ran around together. Until he got to California and worked in the aircraft industry. He came in from California and came up to my house. He said, "Don, did you get my mother out of that house?" And I said, "Well, I don't know Marshall, it was dark. Did she have a pacemaker?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, I got her out then." She was clear up there in the upstairs. They were all upstairs. I guess they thought that if they would just go upstairs they would be safe. And she thought they would be. Never dreamed that the water would get up that high. Like we never dreamed it would come up that high here. I thought it would get up to the house, because I know the elevation from here to the top of the river bank. The elevation right out here at the corner is almost the same at the top of the bank here at the end of the street. So it's level. There's a little dip on between there. Where my mother's house is. I know if water came up much higher then we were going to get some water. But I didn't think it was going to get up that high. (Damage to television, not relevant.) And the logs that came through knocked my car port door off out there. I had three big logs on my car port. My freezer back there floated up and it was on top of all of them. The meat was still frozen in it. No water went in. It floated right up and sit on top of the logs. I still have that to clean up out there, I'm going to cut some of the hedge down. Logs in there....but we were protected I think, Mr. Sheet's house, there was a log in his yard, and the ones that got through, my hedge held some of them off. Our basement was full of water, and of course the boys came around and pumped out my basement for me. The Stevens boyand there were three of them. I offered to pay them and they worked hard pumping it out; they said, "You didn't charge us to use your boat that night, did you?" I said, "No." They said, "Well, we don't charge you anything." And they pumped it out for me.

Michael: That's a great story. Tucker County is full of heroes.

Don: Well....like I told Hilda, anybody that wasn't afraid wouldn't

have hesitated a bit, trying to help people. You just don't think, you just go ahead and do. You know, if a person just sit around and think, well I might do this and I might do that, you don't get anything done. But when you want to help someone, you go ahead and do it. Most anybody, of course you could see someone that might be afraid of water, might not; but about any of these people that I fish with would do the same thing. And without hesitating. Try to help a person.

Michael: Did you think it was kind of a miracle that Amy Moore survived? Not knowing how to swim?

Don: She was very lucky, I think, because the trees that she got in there, the water was coming swift right down through there. And I don't think the condition she was in, getting that far, of course... she had said she got on a piece of a house and then got in that tree, if she had gone past that I think she would have gone down the main part of the river and be gone. I don't think she could have caught anything else. It would have been hard for her to catch anything else. There was a space between those trees and on the next ones, where there was nothing but rough water. I don't think she could have survived that. She would have been mighty lucky. She was lucky the way it was, but it'd been doubly lucky if she would have got a hold of something before she got throwed back out in the main part of the river. People at St. George, I think other than thethe way it turned out other than the shock....the cold, the condition they were in, would have probably got along all right on top by staying. But that's.....you don't know. They were cold, and naturally soaking wet, the water was clear up in the upstairs. And their age and everything, I think that had a lot to do with Mrs. Snyder. Not living long after the flood.

Danny, my son, we were sitting out here at the kitchen table right after the flood, he told Hilda and I, "You're going to see a lot of the older people drop off here right quick." Now how he knew that, I don't know. But boy they did. They started dropping off. We lost a lot of older people here. I don't know whether it's the flood actually gets to them that much or what. But how many did

we have here, just right away, one right after the other dropped off. And he said that would happen. I'm going to ask him how he knew one of these days. Usually I would think, if they survived and were not injured, but I guess it weighs heavy on them. My mother's biggest loss...as far as she is concerned, was her albums, her pictures. She lost those. But I picked her home up; I got some more work to do down there. You go down there, she looks around, she says, "You know, my house is fixed up real nice." I believe the old Cheat River done me a favor." That's her outlook. She would not accept....for a long long time....the meals on wheels. She said, "That's for old people." Here she is, ninety years old. Finally got her to start taking meals that they bring up here some meals they bring up here just the other week. She fell and hurt her hip again, the one that she has the steel joint in. So she's kind of hampered getting around a little bit there for awhile.....(not relevant)

Michael: What actually happened? How do you explain the flood?

Don: Just too much water. A lot of them would like to blame it on the old dike at the mill pond up here. But I can't see that. That much water as near as the valley is, would have come over top regardless. I told Hilda several years ago that we had no way about the river unless it got high enough and so much water that the channel over here wouldn't carry it. And once it starts down the railroad side, we would getwet. I've watched the river through all the years even in '54, it just got to the top of the banks here. The big flood of 1888, according to the records that I hear, that if the water got to the bottom step of the court house, to that elevation, it wouldn't even have been up here in the bottom. So the 1888 flood wouldn't have bothered the bottom here. The water, for one thing, the water first came around. Came down the rain channel, and came across down here. That's why so much stuff was washed up over on the railroad tracks. Because the water came from the river that way. And then when I came down over the hill to look up here, and I had left the porch light on, I could see the water right up to the porch. And I told my son-in-law, "You knw, I believe we're going to be all right." And we went back up over the hill and went downtown

and then when the big surge came, it just rolled right over everything. If you would have put a concrete wall up there, even if you'd put it high, and hadn't put it clear down along here, the water would have still come in. It would have come around. And unless you'd put it up high, it would have come over it anyhow. There was too much water for the narrowness of the valley here. Too much water came down at one time. It would have come through there regardless. In the flood of '54 or '52, I stayed up on the dike there until the water was getting ready to come over it. I could see then what was going to happen, it just came through the pond and went out the other end. And it did. Whatever they do, other than a flood control dam, if the water gets up that high, it would still come down across. Even if they put a concrete wall up there.

You know, I worked construction for a lot of years, and we built dams and all this stuff, but the water there, if you would have put a wall there to keep it from coming across there, it would have come around. Unless you'd put a wall clear down through town, and then, with as much rain as we had, you'd have all the water coming from the hills, coming down this side, so you would have had a water problem, but it might not have been as bad if you had a retainer wall clear around. But I don't think they'll ever build that here. I don't think there's any way that the corps of engineersit's been said that if they would have put a dam in at Rowlesburg that they would have put a retainer wall around it but I can't see, even with a wall, where it would have helped as much, with that much water. You've got the water coming down the Blackwater River. And the Dry Fork River. For the other side, then down at St. George, I don't know what you'd do to protect that. When you get that much water, it's going to come.

Michael: Have you had any new ideas about flood control dams since the flood?

Don: When they talked about building the Rowlesburg dam before I was at several of the hearings. And I got in the middle of quite a controversy then. There were ideas that you put a series of

smaller dams up in the headwaters. But to me, I don't know of anywhere up there where you could actually put a dam that would hold the amount of water that you would have to hold for flood control. Because you're talking about from here up, the same as going up stair steps....you're elevation is going right on up. And you would put a dam right across these stair steps to hold the amount of water, you'd have to put it way high. Because you don't have any area way out....to hold water. If you had a big basin up there somewhere, but I imagine anywhere you'd put a dam above Parsons here on the Shavers Fork River, you'd have to flood clear across through to Kerens and that area to hold any amount of water. In fact, you'd flood a lot of area. To hold the amount of water that you'd have to hold for flood control. Now in Pendleton County they have a lot of earthen dams all over the area. I know some of the companies that we dealt with over the years built them all over Grant and Pendleton Counties. And they do control quite a bit of water. They're holding dams. But I talked to Terry Fairbanks here a couple years ago and he was kind of....I don't know what position he had with that department working out of Morgantown, but he told me that there was no way they could get those kind of dams in Tucker County. On account of the streams and the way they were. The only stream here that he said they could possibly put one of those on, that the government would do it, would be Leading Creek over in Randolph County. But to hold any amount of water it takes a good sized basin. These sharp hollows here, if you put a dam on them to hold any amount of water back, you do have to go high. It'd have to be a high dam. The lake... if they would have put the power company lake in at Davis, it would have helped, would have held quite a bit of water. It wouldn't have been a high dam, but it would have held over 7,000 acres, and it would have held back quite a bit of water coming from that direction. If they'd build a dam at Rowlesburg, it wouldn't help anything here, it would help things below Rowlesburg. But wouldn't help it here. In fact the water would be backed up clear through Holly Meadows. I don't know what they would do. I guess if they

don't put the power dam in up there at Canaan, if they don't put it back here at Davis, I guess small dams are about the best thing they could do to get control. I certainly wouldn't want a huge dam above me here. I can foresee a problem with the dam at Thomas, no bigger than that is. That dam is old, it's deteriorated. And you can imagine what a mess it would have been if it would have broke in all this. And all that mud. And usually those dams are not going to break unless you have a high water situation. That's usually when they break. Of course water squirts out right in the middle of that one there. I know it costs too much for them to repair it. And I know they need their water supply up above it. But it is a hazard. A real hazard.

DONALD C. GOSS

(When he retired last year, the appreciative construction company for whom he had worked many years gave him a substantial 16 foot fishing boat with a 150 horse motor. A bass fisherman's dream come true. He has been everywhere with the boat, and handles it with great skill. Like a Hemmingway hero, he responded to cries for help in the night of November 4th, and launched his sturdy craft in the dark waters of Cheat River. Five months after the flood he sits in the comfortable, recently remodeled living room of his Pulpmill Bottom home. The river was up three feet in the first floor of the house, and left eighteen inches of mud and slime.)

It had been raining all day and I was sitting in the room here working a puzzle...so about dark I went over to the river. I took one look at it and I said, "Yeah, we're going to catch a flood." I stopped at my mother's who lives between me and the river and told her to get her sweater. Hilda [my wife] went with our daughter. I took my mother up on the hill at my cousins, Millers, up there above the manor, I left her and I came right back and hooked my van to the boat. My brother, Leo, lives right on the river, called me and said, "I see you have your boat hooked up." He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm getting out of here, Leo, we're going to get flooded!"

"Auh, it never did get up here," he said.

I said, "You better look around."

It was dark when a couple of fellows walked up the road toward my son's house. They said, "Do you have that boat parked down on the street? There's

some old people trapped in a house in St. George--would you help get them out?" And I said, "I sure will try."

By the time I got down there the emergency cars were sitting there. We started trying to get the boat. Our boat is heavy. Some of the fellows got in clear up to their waist...and we got it across the guard rail. The fellow that came after me, I gave him a life jacket to put on and I told him, "Now if we hit something solid with this prop...and the motor goes off, the boat's going to the bridge. We'll have to swim as hard as we can to get out."

I made one pass towards the house--I wasn't going full speed--I was actually expecting to hit something. The water came around the house. When I got hit with that swift water, it throwed me, and I had to come back around. The next time then I gunned it and got across on the east side of the house where it was kind of calm in there.

I got the boat right up against the side of the house up to the second story window. The other fellow broke out the storm window. People were flashing a light inside so we knew where they were. We got four of them out of there. Bob Cross, I hadn't seen him for years--thought he was dead--he had one leg off. I think he was the first one. I just pulled him right back on the boat and covered him up with what we had. They were wet and scared. So we took four of them that time, and I think a dog.

They told me there was a lady [still] back in the room with a heart condition...I said I needed another man this trip because we were going to have to carry the woman out. One fellow said, "I'll go with you."

I said, "Can you swim?" He said not. Another man stepped forward [who could swim], so I gave him one of those life cushions. "You hold on to that if

anything happens." So we went back to the house. When we got her out I put her on the seat beside me and give her my life jacket. She said she had a problem breathing, so I ran her on in and we put her in the ambulance.

When we come back the next time I could see the water had raised. It was clear up above the window then. The beds were floating. Then I said, "We'll just take everybody that's left in there." The two boys with me and the people-- we had seven the last time. We got them all. I was afraid the water would break through the upper side of the house and drown them. That's why I was scared. Thought maybe the old house would start breaking up. The water was coming around pretty swift. It's a good house. A lot of repairs to do.

I came back to town then, brought the boat back...and a lady stopped me. She asked me if I was part of the National Guard. I said no. Then she told me about her girl [Amy Moore] missing down at Holly Meadows. I know she thought the girl had drowned. She said [her daughter] was 20 years old, couldn't swim. Said that when the jeep upset, they didn't see her around after that. So I said, "It gets daylight, I'll go hunt for her."

Then I went down and parked across from the firehall, got in the back of the van, covered up with a blanket. I was wet. Everybody was wet. I started getting warm and someone flashed a light in. It was Blume, the game warden, and a couple of fellows with him. "There's people on a roof top down at Holly Meadows, they can hear them hollering!" He asked me if I'd take the boat down and try to get them.

"If we can get the boat in, we'll try to get them," I said. So we got as far down the lane as we could get in Holly Meadows, and we had to man-handle the boat. Got it in there.

And the Humphry boy, lives down below town there, he says, "I'm going with you, I'm going to help you."

And I said, "Well, I'll need help." I heard the hollering. I flashed a light over and she was in the tree, right where the swiftest water was. I knew if I'd run the motor right down into the tree I'd probably hit something. There was a tree right up from it and we had this rope...I told the Humphry boy, "I'm going to get next to that tree there, up above her. You snatch this rope around the tree. When I holler, you let off it a little bit."

The boy was strong. He grabbed that tree...he hugged that tree and held on, got the rope around it. Then I got to her, trying to get her to let go. Got her hands loose. I got her down so she could put her foot--stand on top of the motor--and I got her into the boat. Of course then I gunned the boat. I told the boy, "When I start coming out of here you let go the rope!" Then I was heading for shallow water. I run her aground up there in that field.

I told the girl, "You don't have to worry now. You can wade from here. There won't be any swift water." Then these people came and pulled the boat and we got out. They took her and put her in an ambulance. I didn't know her. Here she had been up [to the house] here with my granddaughter before.

Like I told [my wife] Hilda. Anybody that wasn't afraid wouldn't have hesitated a bit trying to help people. You just don't think, you just go ahead and do. You know, if a person just set around and think--well, I might do this and I might do that--you don't get anything done. But when you want to help someone you go ahead and do it. Of course you could see someone that might be afraid of the water might not. But about any of these people I fish with would have done the same thing. And without hesitating. Try to help a person.