

Hank Thompson

Flood Story

Michael: Tell me your full name.

Hank: Hank Thompson.

Michael: And who's your mother and dad?

Hank: My father was Clyde Thompson. And my mother is Elsie Thompson. My father died five years ago. And I've been on my own more or less.

Michael: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Hank: I have one sister, she's twelve years older than I am.

Michael: So you were raised kind of like an only child?

Hank: Well, yeah, sort of. She graduated from High school the year I started at the grade school. So, my parents always said I was the second family. It wasn't bad. I had a real good father. We were close. Real close. He was always interested in sports and stuff. But I made it on my own. Just like I was telling John, hey, if it hadn't been for my father, I don't know where I'd be today. I knew when my father died, if I hadn't taken up from there and done what had to be done, I don't know what would have become of my mother. Went from there.....and if it hadn't been for my wife, I wouldn't have made it. Like right now....I don't even have a home to go to. I got two little boys. One is $4\frac{1}{2}$ and one is 5 months. It's tough. I'm trying to buy a house. I told John, I've worked for everything I own, I'll just have to start over again. That's all I can do.

Michael: That's one of the things you learned from your dad?
How to pick up and go on?

Hank: Right. How to pick up and go on. On my sixteenth birthday, I worked at a gas station, Bishoff's Exxon, my father came down on my birthday, he said, "Let's go buy a car." So we went over and I picked out the car, he signed for it and he said, "Now you pay for it." I paid him back. I made the payments right to him. And I remember right before I got married my father gave me twelve hundred dollars. He said, "That's what you paid for the car. And you have

learned how to save your money. Now take it and use it." For your family." That's how I was raised. If I wanted something, I worked for it and I bought it. I paid for it and it was mine. Everything that I lost in this flood was me and my wife's. Everything. It was paid for. It was ours. I'm twenty-five years old, my wife's twenty-four. We got married when she was eighteen, I was nineteen. And from the day we got married to the present, everything we had was ours. No one else's. We worked for it ourselves. I've told John, I don't want these federal people helping me. Because number one, they won't help you, in my opinion. I couldn't get help; they said, "You make too much money." I'll just start over again. That's all I can do.

Michael: Where were you raised?

Hank: I was raised in a community called Pheasant Run. It's in the southern end of the county. We were raised on a little farm. My dad worked over here in the tanning company twenty-nine years. He had it rough too. He and my mother both did. But they were good people. Church-going people. I told John one time I remember hearing my father in church pray hour upon hour. My father was a good man. And it's just been rough.

Michael: I bet he's gone to a good place.

Hank: I hope. Yep.

Michael: What do you remember about the flood?

Hank: It was on a Monday, I'm off Monday. Officers are off Sunday and Monday. It was bow season and me and one of the state troopers here, Corporal S ? planned to go bow hunting. It had rained, and to me it was just another normal day. A day off and I could go hunting and enjoy myself. We started up to where my mother's farm is and the water was up so we couldn't get across the bridge. We didn't think much of that. We came back to town and....I just got home, see I lived right here. Right when I got home....the fire whistle blew. And I've been in the fire department since '76. Since I was sixteen years old. Of course, I'm the kind of person that if I can help somebody I want to do it. That's the way I was raised. To help others. And I went to the fire hall. I told my wife, I shouldn't be out long. We're just going to move some people. So first, we

up Pheasant, went across the bridge, checked on my family. Made sure that the school bus and everybody got through, then we came back to town. And we had a portable radio, we were in a private vehicle. And we heard a fireman at Hendricks calling for help. That the water was really getting bad. And they needed some help. So Jim Bosser and I, one of the other fireman, went in to where the old Hick fairgrounds is. The water was hitting me at my knees, and I didn't think much of it. Because I never dreamed that the water would come up like it did. We talked to another fireman that was in a truck, they had some people in the firetruck going out, and he said he was going to take them out and then come back. Somehow we found out that Mr. and Mrs. Russell Hebb were in their home. And we were going to try to help them get out. So when we got up there, went up there with...well, we more or less conversed on the place together. It was about twenty after six. And we went in the house. Mr. and Mrs. Hebb, they're elderly people, good people. We got their coats on them and their shoes, and when we came back out the water was up to about my chest. We knew if we didn't get out of there then, we weren't going to get out. Two other firemen, Brian King and a Parsons boy, threw us a rope and we tied it off to the house, and they tied it off to where they were. And we started across. But then another building came down and hit our rope and got all tangled up. And it just took our rope and we couldn't get out. So then I started getting concerned. I didn't know how high the water would be coming up. I got on the phone, and I called the dispatcher over here and I told her, I said, "Hey, the water's bad up here. There's eight people in this house, if you don't get us some help up here, we're going to die." Those were the exact words I told her. She said, "OK, we'll see what we can do." So I tried calling back about fifteen minutes later when the water started running through the house. It was probably about six inches deep on the floor coming across. And I knew that the phones would be going out before long. So I got back on the phone again, and I couldn't get the dispatcher, but I got my wife on the phone.

And I said, "Denise, I'm up here, I'm trapped, in a house, we're all OK now, but you go upstairs and tell the dispatchers that they got to get us out of here or we're going to die." So my wife, she went up. But by that time it was too late. The water was coming through the house and all we could do was go upstairs. So we went upstairs in the house. And it was probably about quarter to seven maybe when we had to go upstairs in the house. And we were all sitting in one little room trying to figure out what we were going to do. We knew the people knew we were in there but they just couldn't get in to us. So then it got dark on us. And I really started getting concerned. And we all sat in one little room of the house. Of course we realized we were trapped; and the power was out. We only had one little light. I sat there by this window and I could see houses, cars, people that I knew had lived there, I saw their homes wash away. I watched their automobiles wash away. I knew then, that this is it. It's over. Life is over for me. And I accepted the fact that I was going to die that night in that house. But it didn't scare me. All I could think of was my family. My two little boys and my wife. That was all I could think about. I remember walking into a room, and Jim Bosser was kneeling down on his knees looking out a window. And of course the water was just roaring. And I said, "What are we going to do Jim?" And he said, "All we can do buddy, is pray." So we didn't say much to each other. And at 12:30, I looked at my watch, there was another gentleman in there by the name of Danny Booth, and I said "Danny, you got any ideas? What are we going to do?" He said, "We're not going to die." And at about that time, somebody said, "Look out!" And I don't know who it was, but another building came down and slammed into the house that we were in and tore the back wall off of it. So all you could hear was glass. And the water rushing through the house. And for about four and a half hours the house just sat there and moved back and forth, and back and forth, rocked off the foundation. And we could just hear trees slamming into the house. I knew we were dead; it was just a matter of when it was going to happen. The elderly lady that was with us. God bless her,

we made her as comfortable as we could, and she went to sleep. And as night went on, the only way we could tell whether the water was rising or going down was from the stairsteps. There were fifteen steps in the house and the water was on the thirteenth step when it started going down. Of course when the water started going down, we realized we might have a chance. Because we didn't know how long the house was going to hold up or anything like that. It gave me a weird feeling to hear the house creak and crack and moving off the foundation. Trees slamming into the house and all the guys that were there with us, there were eight of us. But Danny Hebb, he asked me, he said, "Have you prayed about it?" And I said, "No, I haven't." He said, "Well, let's pray about it." And we did. Eight of us got right down on our knees right there in that house and we prayed. One at a time. And the good Lord heard our prayers. He spared us. I know that's the only thing that held that house there was us praying and the Lord's hand there with it. I don't stand up and confess to be a real religious person or anything, I go to church when I can. But I know that the Lord's hand was on that house that night. Because there are only four homes left there and we were in one of them. During the night hours, we could hear hollering, we could see lights, we could see big pieces of equipment trying to get in to us. But they just couldn't get in to us. And I know one of the firemen, real good friend of mine, he sat there by the railroad tracks all night long. And watched us. Made sure the house didn't go. But when they got us out the next morning, all I could think about was my wife and kids. Where's my wife and kids? I was cold, I was wet, and hungry. So.....when they got us out, I remember going to the tracks, and there were people handing me coffee and blankets. But I just had to get to my family. And of course there was no telephone, no radio communication. So when I started for Parsons, I got as far as the Blackfork Bridge and that was as far as I could get. The bridge was out. I couldn't.... you know I was just worried about my family. So we fooled around there until about 1 or 2 o'clock. And finally we took Jim Propst's truck and we went down _____ way area, and we buried the truck in

the water. And I waded water up to my chest for about a mile, mile and a half. Into Holly Meadows, and then I caught a ride into Parsons and I still couldn't find my wife and my kids. When I finally found them, they were alright, but my wife, she was more or less in shock. When I called her the night that I was in the house, the night before, the dispatcher told her at 9:30 that night that the house we were in had washed away and I was dead. And my four year old son, he was about nuts. She just thought I was gone, but when I found her it was just.....when I found my wife, I could have cared less if my home was gone, my car, everything I had. Because right then the only thing I had left was my family. And it's like I said, if it wasn't for the good Lord above, I wouldn't have had that. Because she fooled around the house until she got trapped in over here. And they had to go in and get her out. And the boy I've arrested, I don't know how many times, God bless him, carried my four year old son out on his shoulders. Bo Haddix. Bo Haddix carried my four year old son out on his shoulders. And one of the county commissioners went in with him, and he told me that my four month old son, he held him up like this, as high as he could, and the water was running across his butt, and he never made a whimper. And my wife told him, she said, "If I go, just make sure you get my babies out." But we're together. And people have been good to us. But I just don't know how.....as I told my wife the other day, sometimes when you look at what you had and now I look at what I don't have. And you just wonder how you can start over again. But I will.....and I'll make it. Because that's the way I was raised. And I'm going to do it. I don't know how else to do it. I work fifty sixty hours a week, and I take home \$400 and some dollars every two weeks, and I'll make it. I've got a very very good wife. She works part time. If I had my choice I wouldn't have her working at all. But we're just going to start over again. That's all we can do.

Michael: So your home was at....

Hank: I lived in the sheriff's residence, that section of the jail

itself. It was my home.

Michael: And that's what washed away?

Hank: Right. The inside of it. The back wall busted out. The only thing I got out of the house was my guns. The state trooper and the guys that I had in jail, they let them out of jail and they went in and got my guns out for me. And that's it. That's all we saved, except some beds that we had upstairs. But we had all our baby stuff downstairs. I found furniture in my house that wasn't even mine. People can sit and they can tell you the experiences that they had the night of the flood, and you can read articles in the paper that people from out of state wrote about things like this. And you can even talk to people that were some kind of help to someone. But nobody, nobody knows.....and if I was ever called to go help somebody, I'd do it again. And get in that situation..... yeah, I would. If I could help someone else, and maybe risk my life to save them, yeah, I'd do it. Because that's the way I was raised. I think that's why the good Lord put me here on this earth. God's got a purpose for me here. Somehow, some way. I've just got to find out what it is. Even my little boy, now, when it rains real hard, he wants to know. "Daddy there isn't going to be another flood is there?" He is terrified. And that bothers me. And there are just so many things that run through your mind, I think, well, if I would have stayed home that night I could have saved some of my stuff. Then again, it wouldn't have done me any good.. Because it's gone. It just goes to show you, I've been in this job almost six years, I've worked my hind end off for everything I've got, and it goes to show you, you can lose it in less than eight hours. But I just thank God, for my family. And that's what I have left. And He'll find me a way. If there's a will there's a way. I was always taught that.

Michael: What about you...have you dreamed about this yourself?

Hank: Yeah, I've had problems with it. For a couple weeks I'd go to bed and I'd wake up in the middle of the night thinking I was still in that house up there. I don't know why. I guess I'd just

go to sleep thinking about it. I'd wake up hearing the roar of the water or something like that. I had problems for a couple weeks, but everything seems to be alright now.

Michael: It's been thirteen weeks hasn't it, since then?

Hank: But as far as being in a place with any other people.... I couldn't have found any better people to spend the night with me than I had up there with me in that house that night.

Michael: Did you learn alot about those people?

Hank: Hey.....yeah.

Michael: Learned a lot about yourself too.

Hank: Yeah buddy. A whole lot. I just can't explain the feelings that I had that night. It was amazing to me, because I'm the kind of person, I can sit around and I can think about dying and it does not bother me. But you are really not in a position where you know you're going to die. When you're thinking about it like that. But that night, I knew that I was going to die. And I had to accept that. Accept the fact that I was dead. I just had to wait until the house went. It gives you a weird feeling, you're sitting there for eight or nine hours just waiting for the minute you are going to die. I never slept. It was amazing, but one man that was up there that night, and that was Danny Hebb, if it hadn't been for him and getting down and praying about it, I don't know if we would have made it or not. Because I am a very firm believer that the good Lord is the only thing that saved that house. There's no doubt in my mind, when we got out that morning, there was nothing left. Half a house was there. But the people that were in it, we survived! Because God wanted us to. I know all my friends were worried about me. I know the sheriff and the states, they were worried about me. They knew I was trapped up there. Like I said, I lost everything, but I still have my wife and my kids. And I'll make it. I'll make it. And that's just something that I have to face. If it takes \$30,000 or \$40,000 dollars to build me a home, or whatever, that's something that I've got to do. Because I can't think of myself. I've got to think of my family.

Michael: Since the flood you've been working regular, where have you been staying?

Hank: We stay with my mother. We stayed with my mother approximately a month and a half. And she lives out in the country, and it wasn't very easy for me, like if I'd get called out in the middle of the night, to go somewhere, and we felt it would be better if we'd go stay with her mother, which is right outside of Parsons here, up in Brents. So that's where we're presently living now.

Michael: How is that?

Hank: It's just not....you know, it's just not like having your own home. I go up there at night and sit around, turn the TV on,, and I think, "God, I could be in my own home, you know." It's out there, I just have to go get it.

Michael: What's been your experience with these federal agencies or with other....?

Hank: delete. You can't sit down and grieve about it forever, I know that I don't want to ever spend another night like that. But if I had to, to benefit someone, I would. But as far as sitting down and crying about it, and grieving about it from now on, there's no need to because it's over. It's done. I lost what I had. Hank, you just get up, you start over again. Because I don't want to look back, I want to look forward. I learned two things during that night in that house up there. Two most important things in life. You've got to have faith in other people, and there is a God. I dearly love those seven other people that were in that house up there with me. I told Jim Bosser the next morning, "I don't know about you, but Sunday morning when;the church doors open, I'm going to be there." And I haven't missed since.delete....I learned how to trust people. If it hadn't been for Danny Hebb up there, at one point, I was going to try to swim for it. I had made up my mind, I was going. Danny said, "No. Just pray about it." And believe me, praying is a lot better than trying to do what you think you can do. But we made it. And we've kept close contact with the guys that were in

the house up there. Just like one big family. I don't think anybody....like I said, people can sit and talk about the flood, and what they lost, but unless the people were really in it and had some terrifying experience, they don't realize what happened.delete....the day I got back into town, Tuesday morning, and I was trying to find my family, there was this lady, I can't remember what her name was, and I was crying because I wanted to find my wife and kids; I didn't know if they were dead or alive. And this lady was so much comfort to me, and she checked on me for weeks after it was over with.

John: Can you remember the names of all the fellows that were with you in the house?

Hank: Sure. Yeah buddy. Me, Jim Bosser, Danny Booth, Russell Hebb, Mrs. Hebb, Roy Lipscomb, and Danny Hebb. There were eight of us.

John: What do you know of the experiences of Brian King and the Parsons boy?

Hank: Everything. We were together. They were across the street from us. We had contact with them all night. Give them credit. They are like sixteen seventeen years old. They joined the fire department as junior firemen. I've been in the fire department since '76, I've seen a lot of junior firemen come and go. Give these two young men credit where credit is due. They risked their lives to get in to save me and the other senior firemen. They waded water into about their waist to this other house directly across the street from us. And they would have gotten us out if the rope wouldn't have gotten tangled up in the debris. I was concerned about them because I was afraid that they would lose it. And they wouldn't know what to do and try to swim for it. We yelled across, "Hey! Break the window out of the house." Go upstairs." They did. And we kept signals all night long with them. And they did great. Mike Parsons and the King boy, they were just like adults that night. They handled it real well.

Michael: So they were in the same fix you were, just across the street.?

Hank: Yeah. All together there were ten people in two houses.

Michael: And they went in to that house to try to save you.

Hank: Right. They went in there across the street and they threw a rope to us and we tied it off and started to cross. One of them yelled, "Look out!" And there came a building and just took our rope. And there we were. No way to get out.

John: We thought there were only two people in the Hebb's house. And we could see your lights.

Hank: I was sogglad to get out of that house on Tuesday morning, that when we knew it was daylight and we could see the firemen working to get us out, we knew somehow, some way, they were going to get us out of there. And it took them about $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours to come across to string a rope. Tied a rope on a rope to get to us. And Charles Lloyd, he's the one that talked me into joining the fire department. He was my school teacher. And he was one of the guys that came in after us that night. Or that day. He came across, and of course, it wasn't the idea, "Give me the rope, I want out of here." We still had concern for Mr. and Mrs. Hebb. We got them out first. We put them in a boat, we guided them across, fed a guide rope with a loop on the boat. I was the next to the last one out. Or the third to the last one out. We just took our clothes off got a hold of the rope and went under water. Just pulled ourselves across until we could.....and I can remember Charlie Lloyd yelling, "Stand up! Stand up!" He kept saying. And when I stood up I was so glad that there was land there that I could stand on where I could walk. But when we went across there was a crevice deeper than this room here. If we would have tried to get out at night we never would have made it. I don't want to get a pat on the back. Because I went up there on my own. I volunteered to go up there and help people, which I like to do. But it makes me sick, when I pick up the newspaper, and you see....they advocate this, Mariwyn Smith's family this and so forth and so on.....which is fine. They had a great night too, I'm sure. But not one time, has anybody come up to me or any of these seven other gentleman that were in that house, and said, "Hey, you want to talk about it?" Not one time. And I

know there's probably people out there that had a worse night than I did. And I would love to know who they are so I could go talk to them. Everybody that was a victim, or involved in this flood, in my opinion, should sit down and talk about it. I talked to John. John was the first person I talked to. And I stood right up there at the court house and I cried. Because I had no one to talk to. If my father was alive, I'd talk to him. And my mother, I talk to her about it but she has no idea of what me, and probably a couple hundred people went through that night. But I'm here, and I'm planning on starting over no matter what it cost me. And some day I'm going to have another house. And I'm going to have another living room and another TV to watch. Hey. I'm only twenty-five years old. (Delete) My wife, she.....she's smart, she's pretty, but when I finally found her on Tuesday afternoon about 4 o'clock, when I walked through the door she was stunned, like a zombie. She said, "Oh my God! I thought you were dead." Ever since we got to do a little hugging, when I walked through the door, that's the way it is now everytime I walk through the door. And my wife also has some emotional problems. She knows that the job I do now is dangerous. And everytime I leave the house, I always kiss my wife and two little boys because it might be the last time I see them. But the main thing is, I've got the good Lord with me now. Whatever happens to me, I know that someone will provide for my family. But I'm sure those seven other people that were in that house will tell you the same thing that I'm telling you right now.

Michael: I'm real anxious to talk to them.

Hank: I've been in worse jams. I've been in bad situations before. But I have never been in a situation where I knew I was going to die. And I'm sitting here telling you, that I knew I was going to die. I just had to sit and wait for it to happen. And I waited from 12:30 that night until 8:45 that next morning, and I didn't die. And the reason I didn't die is, like I said, the good Lord has a purpose for me here on earth.

(delete)

It was a good experience and yet it was a bad experience. From what I gained that night in that house up there, I will never lose it.

Because I went through it. And I know what it's all about now. And I intend to hang on to what I got left. There's just not many people I can sit down and talk to like I can John. I hardly even knew this man, until I got to talking with him, and I got to like him. (delete)

I believe this flood, possibly, in my opinion, was meant to be. To make people realize what I have told you and what I realize now. We're on borrowed time, fellows. We're on borrowed time. That's why I'm twenty-five years old and I hope to live to be a hundred and twenty-five years old. And every minute that I've got from now on is going to be with my family, making my life better. Because my whole life flashed in front of my eyes in Mr. and Mrs. Russell Hebb's house in Hendricks that night.