

Present: John Fleenor, Marie Williams, Tim Potter, Michael Nobel Kline

Michael Nobel Kline: Okay. Can you say, "My name is?"

John Fleenor: John Fleenor.

MNK: One more time.

JF: John Fleenor.

MNK: Okay. And your date of birth?

JF: December 22, 1926.

(005)

MNK: And you are currently?

JF: Owner of John's Flower Shop.

MNK: In?

JF: Grundy.

MNK: And you're also the mayor of?

JF: Also the mayor of the town of Grundy.

MNK: And you were elected to that office in?

JF: Elected to that office in April of '95, '96, I guess it was.

MNK: Okay. And had you ever held that office before?

JF: Yes, I had.

MNK: When was that?

(011)

JF: I've held it about three different times. I don't know, remember the dates.

MNK: It didn't include 1977, did it?

JF: No, 1977 Mrs. Berry was mayor at that time. I'm pretty sure it was.

MNK: Could you just start off by telling me a little bit about your people and where you were raised?

(016)

JF: Well, I was raised in Wise County, Virginia, around Norton. Of course I have two children, a boy and a girl. They were raised here in the county, Buchanan County.

MNK: But you grew up around Norton?

JF: Yes, sir. I grew up in Norton.

(020)

MNK: And when did you come to Grundy and why?

JF: I came to Grundy in April of 1951 to run a flower shop for Norton Floral Company at that time. And later I bought them out. Been here ever since.

MNK: In the flower business?

JF: Yes, in the florist business.

MNK: Have you enjoyed that?

(025)

JF: Enjoyed it very much. It's been my life, might as well say. I've been here in this building since April of '51. Of course we went through a few floods in that time, high waters, but nothing like the '77 flood. Which during the '77 flood I had, I believe it was forty-two inches of water in the main part of the building. Lost everything I had and had to start over again.

MNK: What do you remember about early April that year? Was it a rainy time?

(035)

JF: Yes, it was quite rainy. Of course it rained for two or three days there in a row around the first of April, which caused the flooding. We came out to work that morning, and of course the water was high, but it wasn't out of the banks or anything. But by noon it was up getting in the building, and we had to evacuate the building, get out of it. And was out until, I don't know, for a week, well, a month. I was out of business for about a month during that time for the damages. But--

MNK: Could you describe in more detail on how the water came up or what it was like for you, how you felt about it?

(045)

JF: Well, I really wasn't too much concerned because we had had water before, even in the basement of the building from the river. But that morning, why they kept saying you better move out. And of course I thought, well, it'd just be another soaking we get for part of the building. But it just kept coming up and coming up until by, I don't know, two or three o'clock or something like that, why it was getting up near the floor. So we did leave and spent the evening up at a friend's house up on the hill from it. And about midnight or so it started going down, and we could get across the bridge, which was adjacent to the property. And had to walk up the railroad to get home. And we were stuck there then for several days.

(058)

MNK: At home?

JF: At home, yeah.

MNK: What do you mean, you were?

JF: Well, the road was washed out at the bridge, which leads to my house. And had to wait for repairs to it to be able to get back in to the main highway.

MNK: And how were things at home?

(062)

JF: Things at home were fine. I live up on the hill. If the water gets that, they'll have everything in the whole town. But we were without power and water for a few days, but we made out.

MNK: How did the whole town fare in that?

(066)

JF: Well, the whole town was flooded, the downtown part. Some got more damage than others. But I lost all of my stock and everything I had in the building, which was, run in several dollars, several thousand dollars. And of course I had some insurance, which helped me out.

MNK: They didn't call it an Act of God?

JF: No, no, it was just nature's course it took.

(075)

MNK: So you had to remodel the building...

JF: I had to clean it all out and had to throw all the stock out I had and then replace it before I got back in business, which took about three weeks to a month.

MNK: How did some of the other businesses in town fare?

(080)

JF: Well, they were all damaged pretty much. There's trees in the street and mud about six inches deep in all of the buildings. And it took a long time to clean them up and people to get back in business. But most of them did return and open their business back up. There was a few of them that went out.

MNK: Tell me about steps the town has taken over the years to try to protect itself...

(088)

JF: Well, the town has—they've cleaned up the riverbanks, which should help some. Of course as the water raises, why it don't make any difference how far away from it you are, it's going to get to you if it gets high enough. But the town has spent a lot of money cleaning up the riverbanks and different things to give the water a better flow.

MNK: What about some of the bigger plans of protection, flood protection plans?

(096)

JF: Well, of course they've talked about this, putting in walls and different things to protect. I don't know—of course the Corps of Engineers are working on that at this time.

MNK: Tell me more about that plan. Is it—it's more than just a wall, isn't it?

(100)

JP: Yes, it's a plan which includes four laning 460, plus protection for the remainder of the town, which will not be taken by the Corps of Engineers. And then the rebuilding of the town in a different section.

MNK: And how does that plan look to you?

(106)

JP: The plan looks very good to me. Of course I don't know how many like to relocate, but I feel that it sure would help the town as a whole.

MNK: Is this the—is what you're talking about going to occur over on the depot...

(111)

JP: Yes, sir. It's a piece of property that was owned by the railroad, which they donated to the town. And it's just across the river from the present town of Grundy. And it would make a real nice site for several businesses if they do take a notion to relocate.

(116)

MNK: Okay. Tim, have you got any other questions or anything that we should cover? Is there anything else you can think of?

JP: No, there's nothing else I can think of at this time, sir.

MNK: Okay, great. Thank you.

[Tape turned off]

Marie Williams

(120)

MNK: Okay, we're rolling. We're—let's see, we're at—can you start out by saying, "My name is?"

Marie Williams: My name is Marie Williams.

MNK: One more time for me, please.

MW: My name is Marie Williams.

(123)

MNK: Okay. And I won't ask your age, but maybe you could give me your date of birth.

MW: November the 27th, 1915.

MNK: Okay. And how long have you been in this house, at this address?

MW: In this house, about thirty-two or three years.

(129)

MNK: And can you tell me a little bit about your people and the place you were raised?

MW: Well, I've lived in Grundy all of my life, in Buchanan County and in Grundy. I've lived here all of my life.

MNK: Your mother and dad came here?

(134)

MW: Well, my father was from Kentucky, Pikeville, and my mother was a native of Buchanan County. And she had lived here all of her life. I have two brothers. Well, one's deceased. One brother alive and two sisters. One lives in Florida, and one lives in South Boston, Virginia. And I have three children, one in Grundy that lives with me, my son, and one daughter that lives in Yorktown, or near Yorktown, Virginia. And the other one lives in Atlanta.

(145)

MNK: Well, I gather there are three kind of magic numbers for Grundy—

MW: Yes.

MNK: —'37, '57, and '77.

MW: Oh, yes.

MNK: You could probably remember—

MW: I had all three floods.

MNK: Well, just kick back and tell us the whole story.

(148)

MW: I had a—we—I had a fair house. It wasn't great, but it was livable. So when my mother died, she left me a little money. And I tore the house down and raised it seven and a half feet from where the house was and built this present home. Now this house is supposed to be two feet higher than the house above me, but this '77 flood came four and a half feet into this house after raising it seven and a half feet. Now '63 was when I tore the house down and built this house.

(162)

MNK: What about the flood of '57? Did that get in the old house?

MW: Yes, in the old house. And I said, "No more am I going to live in this house. I'm going to get away from this water." I thought I would get away from the water, but I didn't.

MNK: Tell me the whole story. Had it been raining a lot that April?

(167)

MW: In '77, yes. It had rained for about three days, and the water was up. And it was up high. But we had a birthday party for my daughter, and she was here. And she had her children and a visitor. And it had been raining about three days. And then the morning of the flood it came a thunderstorm, a very heavy thunderstorm. But by having several people in the house we didn't know just exactly what to do, you know. She'd—she was getting ready to leave, but I wanted to have the birthday cake. So I, we stayed on and, so that she could eat her birthday cake and then go home. And you know the flood got that birthday cake! It did, it got the birthday cake. And—

MNK: What do you mean?

(181)

MW: It just came on in. Well, I had a roast in the oven and the birthday cake ready to serve to my family, and they were going to leave about noon after they had eaten the roast and the birthday cake. And the flood just came on in, and I walked out the door. I pulled a switch over to the power and walked out the door. I didn't take anything with me. I put boxes and things on top of the beds, you know, dresser drawers and things up on top of the beds, but I made no preparation at all to—I didn't even take a clean shirt or shoes. I really suffered for shoes, because I'm messy. I keep all the shoes on the floor of my closets. Well, now they're up high, because I didn't have any shoes. And I went across the street and stayed with my nice neighbor, Emily VanMeter (?sp.). She was very helpful to me, you just wouldn't believe how. She didn't make me feel—

(198)

I mean I didn't feel homeless. I felt like, you know—it took me several days to realize I was homeless. The next morning we could come back in. And I think my son had put the—that's right, he had put the TV, this, similar to this one right here, a great, big TV on top of the dining room

table. And that TV was dumped off into the floor and broken all to pieces. The water was up to the midsection of the back windows, about four feet, six inches.

MNK: Mercy. Can you describe how watching the water come up--

(210)

MW: Well, we were more concerned about the young people, I think, more than anything else, because they were sight-seeing the water. And we really just—I mean they were, you know, my daughter’s children. And they would walk down to see. And so it was frightening. It was really frightening for us. But for them it was, you know, kind of exciting. And they were watching the water, watch the houses go down and all that kind of stuff. Oil tanks, that was—that’s something I remember. Like broken propane oil tanks and houses, small houses, all kinds of logs. We had a mound of earth that formed between this house and the house next door.

(224)

A—we had to get a bulldozer, a high-lift to come in and remove that mound of earth, and logs, and sticks, and things. The house held, but there was water, and logs, and the shrubbery was all covered with plastic bags and mud. The house didn’t look too bad. It has storm windows and storm doors, and the house inside didn’t look too bad. And the Mennonites came in a day or two and helped us shovel mud, and sweep, and wash down, and cleanup. And Dr. Rob’s wife from Princeton came and cleaned my oven, and cleaned the stove, and cleaned in the kitchen. And my neighbors carried out my dishes and washed them. My sisters, and brothers, and different ones sent me clothing, and we rehabilitated. It was amazing. But we worked. I want you to know we worked. There were people driving along, you know, “Hello there, how are you?” But we were scrubbing, and cleaning, and working.

MNK: Was there a fair amount of mud in the house?

(250)

MW: Well, yes. Right much mud. It was more like in the carport. And the backyard was about five feet higher. We never did remove it. It’s right now about five feet higher than it was when, the original yard.

MNK: You come out ahead on that deal then, huh?

(257)

MW: Yes. Well, it was sand. And I have—now I have to get soil if I’m going to plant anything like a tomato plant. I have to get a bag of soil to put down in that sand. It’s all sand. Very poor soil, really.

MNK: After the flood were you pretty depressed, or—it sounds like you didn’t even have time for that.

(264)

MW: No, we worked. We cleaned. We had to tear out the carpet and take old, big, old furniture out soaking wet. I remember a couch that was in the little den that we had. It was a bed, hide-a-bed couch type. That thing was so heavy it was unbelievable. It took about three or four people to get it out because it was so wet, and covered with mud. It was amazing, though, that in a little while that it dried out. And we were allowed to turn the heat on and dry the house out. And in about a week or so we moved back in.

(279)

The Presbyterian Church was the center of a food bank. And they cooked meals. We could not have cooked. The fact is, there wasn't anywhere here to go get anything to eat. The Presbyterian Church hosted a food kitchen for us. Neighbors came in and helped cook food and served it to us. I appreciated that, I really did. Then a little later we could send out and get hamburgers and things, after we moved back in the house. We still couldn't cook because it was not sanitary. It was just really not livable. I stayed with Emily VanMeter across the street about two days, and then I visited with my neighbor up the street... Terry, for about a week or so. And we moved back in here and slept, but we didn't cook or eat, because we didn't feel like it was sanitary. And we'd send out and get hamburgers and eat cereal and things like that.

MNK: And how long was it before you got your kitchen reestablished?

(302)

MW: Oh, about two weeks. The Mennonites came and helped us sanitize everything. They helped move the food out. Anything that looked to them like, you know—they said anything inside of the refrigerator that was not opened would be, that we could—it was clean inside of the refrigerator, but anything that was not opened, like can of anything we could keep. That's about all.

MNK: Were there women who came with the Mennonites as well, or mostly men?

(313)

MW: Men. Very nice. They were very helpful. They swept, and scrubbed, and hosed down, and cleaned paneling, and cleaned windows. They were very helpful. Of course we had to hire a lot of help. Now the flood—I have flood insurance, but flood insurance does not cover help in time of flooding. Does not cover hired help. It only covers furniture and the house itself. I mean windows, if anything was broken. Some of the heating elements were broken, it replaced. And doors, some of the doors and the windows. But the hired help, that was the thing, is getting someone to help you. And that's the reason I appreciated the Mennonites, because they worked free.

(331)

And then we hired some local people to help us clean. People will think, you know, you had flood insurance, you know, you were okay, but that is not true. My yard was a mess. It was a mess. And I had a pretty yard! I did, I had a pretty yard. And it just—trees were all—shrubbery was all covered with plastic bags and mud. And all of that had to be cleaned out, hosed down. Yard

had to be reseeded. And, as I said, I had to get a high-lift to—the mound of earth that came between the two houses had to be moved. Oh, and the little wall we had at the back was washed out. People were coming—it was strange, people were coming... back anything that we just—they told us, “Just pile it up out the back and out the front, and they’ll get rid of it.” They were coming along the back, you know, hunting for whatever we threw away. Just strange. I wouldn’t want it. It was dirty.

MNK:

(357)

Why did the water come up the way it did? Did you ever figure out why?

MW: It had rained three or four days, and it gradually came up. And it was high when the thunderstorm came that morning. And my daughter says, “As soon as we have lunch, we’ll leave.” And so we were going to have the lunch, and then they were going to get in the car and leave. And it just kept on thundering. I mean it was a real thunderstorm. I don’t know how many inches of rain it rained that morning. It had rained for about three or four days before that. But now I know if it starts raining like that I’ll get out and take me a clean shirt and a pair of shoes! We have packed several times since then. I mean, you know, high water. We have packed a suitcase ready to go two or three times. It’s been in the carport. Within the last ten years, it’s been in the carport, mud. Not in the house, but in the carport. And when it does that, I pack a suitcase, get me some shoes.

MNK: Do you ever dream about the flood or—

(383)

MW: No, it doesn’t bother me psychologically. I’m not like my neighbor. My neighbor, she just couldn’t live on this river. She—it frightened her so much. But I’m a stronger personality. I don’t—it doesn’t depress me, no. Except when it’s raining! I get a little down when it’s raining hard. One time a heavy snow frightened us. It was a heavy—it had rained, and then it turned to snow. And that was frightening. Because when snow goes out, it leaves a lot of water. And that was kind of frightening.

MNK: Are you aware of this new flood control plan that the town is talking about?

(398)

MW: Oh, yes. I’m for it one hundred percent. I feel like Grundy needs to be reworked and moved or moved—there’s nothing down in town to speak of to me. I’ve lived here all of my life, and I’m not attached to this house that much or to the town. I feel like that it needs to move on and make more progress.

MNK: So you think it’s a progressive plan?

MW: Oh, yes. By all means, I think it’s a progressive plan.

MNK: What does it entail? Are they actually going to move the commercial district of... ?

(415)

MW: Commercial district. Put a floodwall around the town itself and a ring wall around the courthouse. And that is the thing that we need to preserve, is the courthouse. And, as far as I know, several other buildings will be preserved along with the ring wall. Now I'm concerned about the new Appalachian School of Law. I think that it would be threatened by flooding if Grundy remains the same as it is. And it's a beautiful building. They've spent lots of money on it. And I would hate to see flood come along and ruin it. If they move some of those buildings out that are in the creek, in Slate Creek, tear them down, get rid of them, it would help the water flow from Slate Creek into Levisa River, which would make it a whole lot better.

MNK: Because the way it is now it--

(436)

MW: The way it is it blocks the water coming from Slate Creek into Levisa River, which makes it backup into the homes and businesses. Such as the Morgan Theater is in the creek. The firehouse and several buildings are just right in the creek. When I grew up they were not there. They'd been built--in my lifetime they've been built right there in the creek. And you can expect them, you know, to--you can't expect the water to flow freely with buildings in the creek, Slate Creek. Those are the buildings that, to me, should go. Some of them. Some of the others could be preserved, but those buildings along the creek, Slate Creek, should be moved and moved now, is the way I think, the way I feel about it.

(460)

MNK: Before even the new is built?

MW: Well, sure. They block the flow of Slate Creek into the river.

MNK: Do you remember stories that your mother, or her mother, or any of them told about earlier floods? Has Grundy always been troubled this way?

(469)

MW: No, not really. My grandfather built rafts out of timbers, tied them together and went to Catlettsburg, Kentucky, on the raft with his timber. And he got a lot of money out of it because he had some property and some nice timber. That's how he really got ahead. And bought houses. Was quite well- to-do. He was an Elswick and lived down at Weller Yard. And I remember seeing those rafts. He wasn't the only one. Those rafts would go by our house, and we, you know, and we'd go around down the river here would come a raft. I lived--Earlier in my life I lived down at, where Weller Yard is now.

(488)

MNK: Where what?

MW: Weller Yard.

MNK: Weller, W-E-L-L-E-R?

MW: Um hmm. Weller. Until I was about seven or eight years old. I don't remember exactly. Seven or eight years old we moved to Grundy.

MNK: But in your father's time they were floating logs down the river?

MW: Oh, yes.

MNK: ...

(496)

MW: My father and my grandfather, and he hired people to go along with him and take the timber down to Catlettsburg, Kentucky, on the river. It was kind of exciting to see those rafts going down, the log rafts.

MNK: Well, thank you for the story about the flood. I wonder if I could now ask you a little bit-- You were a school teacher, were you, in this county?

(507)

MW: Well, I was a substitute teacher. I had my children six years apart. And I only taught when they were able to, when I was able to be free from taking--I felt like I needed to stay at home with my children. And when my son was about six years old I started doing substitute teaching full time. And that's all I have ever done. I didn't teach full time, just substitute teaching.

MNK: Tim, is there anything else you want me to--no....

Tim Potter: That's a pretty good account of the way things were here.

MW: Um hmm.

TP: I really didn't see this area up here that much until after a lot of it was already cleaned up, because we were all busy cleaning their place up. So that's pretty much it.

(530)

MW: Were you in the flood?

TP: Yeah, sure. I was down in... Creek.

MNK: Bad place to be.

TP: ...

(534)

MW: My grandfather sold Weller Yard to Norfolk and Western for the yard. He owned the property where Weller Yard is now situated. And that was where he lived and where my grandmother and grandfather lived. And where my mother and my husband are buried there, a little cemetery up on the hill at Weller Yard.

TP: My wife is an Elswick.

MW: Well, Elswick has a reunion—

TP: Yes.

MW: —in August. Second Sunday in August.

(549)

TP: Yeah. Two weeks ago, I believe. MW: Two weeks ago.

TP: Um hmm.

MW: I didn't go. It's so big now. It's just so big.

TP: A lot of people.

(553)

MW: A lot of people. I have told the Corps of Engineers the first time they came here that I would relocate if necessary. That I would move out. Because I don't want any more road any closer to me than it already is. If I have to move, I don't have eight feet or whatever to give them, or to let them have. I need to move off.

(564)

MNK: So the road, the new road would come right through here?

MW: It would come up to my porch! And I don't want a truck in my bedroom in the middle of the night. So I had already told them that I would move.