

Present: Helen Johnson, Pat Johnson, Michael Nobel Kline

Helen Johnson: My name is Helen Combs Johnson.

Michael Nobel Kline: And I don't ever ask people their ages—

HJ: I don't mind.

MNK: —but maybe you could tell me your date of birth.

HJ: I don't mind. I'm eighty-five years old. My date of birth was February the 7th, 1912.

?: Don't she look good?

MNK: She looks great.

HJ: I'm in good health, and I feel good.

MNK: That's great.

HJ: So far my memory's good!

?: So she doesn't have Alzheimer's.

HJ: Not yet.

MNK: You--Can you tell me a little bit about your people and where you were raised?

(008)

HJ: Well, I was born and raised right here in Grundy. My uncle even delivered me. My father's brother was a doctor, and he delivered me. And I was delivered at home in the town of Grundy right downtown where the Combs Building is now. That's where our house was. And we stayed there until the town burned in 1915. And my mother and father took my brother and me out rolled up in a blanket when the town burned on Christmas Eve 1915. Rolled in a blanket, and took us up and put us out of the fire way. And they carried most of their wedding presents out of the house and got them out safe before the fire took our home. And it was on Christmas Eve. And the last thing, as she came out of the house she grabbed a little doll off of the Christmas tree. And that's--

(018)

Our Christmas then was—next morning we were...we had spent that night in Mr. John Flanagan's home, which is Ed Matney's old home now... house. And the next day—my brother was a baby about two years old, and he was crying, "I want to go home." I'm sure it was heartbreaking to my mother and father.

Well, then we lived several places before my father built a house back up on the hill, way up. It was out of town at that time. Now it's right in town practically.

MNK: Where was that?

(026)

HJ: It's up on the hill, really above the Fowler Apartments now, up where the, up above Rife Chevrolet. And that was—my father built that too, built the Rife Chevrolet and the Virginia Mountaineer Building.

MNK: Do you ever think of the river as a lifelong acquaintance—?

HJ: Oh, sure.

MNK: —somebody whose character you could describe...?

(032)

HJ: Well, I've seen it come and go many times. I can remember as a child standing in the window when we lived downtown. I was three years old then when the town burned, seeing big logs come down the river in the winter. It was not a flood, but when the spring rains came the men let the logs come down the river, and they'd make big rafts and go down the river on those rafts to Kentucky. They took them into Catlettsburg, Kentucky.

MNK: So you were talking about, last night, about—

(039)

HJ: About the river as a—when we were growing up it was very clean. And they had a place they baptized people because there was a nice sandbar there. And then during the week, as we grew up when we were in our teens, we went swimming in it all during the week. In fact, I was baptized in the river down there. And I remember when my father was baptized there. He wasn't baptized until my mother set him straight. Got him baptized. So I've known the river all of my life. I've seen it come and go. And—

MNK: What is its character? Is it...?

(047)

HJ: Well, it's getting higher all the time. Because my father, before he built these buildings down on the river—I was telling someone that he had a big rock over on the side of the mountain that, or side of the hill that he had watched for years. And when he put up the Chevrolet building and the Virginia Mountaineer Building, he built them because he said that the water had never been that high. Well, he died before he saw it flood like it has now. But since all of the mines and the cutting of timber, the river has just risen higher and higher every year. And I've got pictures from

three different floods that have come, and they've all gotten higher. The last flood in '77 was the, covered both of these roads here. There was nothing--The water was up into my yard, went to the mountain on the other side. It was covered. And of course I couldn't get out so I didn't get downtown until it was over, because I was, couldn't get out of Long Bottom.

(059)

MNK: Tell me everything you can remember that--this microphone is really very sensitive--tell me everything you can remember...

HJ: ...shut up.

MNK: Those were the delicate words I was looking for.

HJ: Yeah.

MNK: Tell me--

HJ: I'm not known for delicate words.

MNK: Tell me everything you can remember about that week in April. (064)

HJ: What? You mean the flood? Well, it really came up in a hurry. I had--my auditor was here doing my taxes before April 15. And I said, "Just come on up to my house." He got here from Bristol like early in the morning. And Pat, my son, was working downtown in a law office. He hadn't gone to law school then. And he worked down there. It was just a steady rain all day, and we didn't think much about it. But by the middle of the afternoon Pat came home and he stopped at the grocery store and bought bread and a lot of things for sandwiches. And by the time Mr. Taylow got through working, he couldn't get out of here.

(073)

So he's had to spend the night with me. And Pat came home with all the--and Ed Matney was living over in my apartment on the other side, and we all came in here. And then the lights went out. Then when the lights went out I didn't have any water. So we had caught water, enough to get along with, but we had none in the bathrooms. But the water just kept coming up and coming up until you couldn't get out of Long Bottom. When Pat came home in the afternoon, the water was going across the bridge down there that you come into Long Bottom. And we ate and had sandwiches, and I had--when the lights went out I had a frozen chicken in the refrigerator. And we had built a fire in the fireplace, and we put on my pressure cooker and put that in there and just boiled it. And we ate boiled chicken. That's all I had left. Wasn't much in the freezer.

(085)

Pat Johnson: You had come back from Florida.

HJ: Yeah, just come back to have my taxes done. And we ate sandwiches, and that was it. And when Ed came over that night, and his wife, and we played games. But we had the big candle

sconce above the fireplace, and we played games while the water was rising. We were—and when we went to bed we could just hear the water. It was up. No street lights, we couldn't see. But I remember Pat saying, "Momma, we've had a good time tonight, but there's many people that have lost everything they've got from this flood." And it was just... Next morning we just couldn't believe it to see it. The water was up to the first tree in my yard and went clear across the river to, I mean it was a creek, but it went across to the mountain on the other side. So you couldn't see a road anywhere. We were just isolated up here. And of course that little hollow was running down out there, and it was coming in here. And I had water standing on the patio several inches thick. We were going out there and getting water to use in the bathrooms. So it was really—I was lucky to be on this hill. And everybody in Long Bottom brought their cars up here, and it looked like a used car lot out here because their cars were here to get out of the road.

(102)

MNK: ...lucky they had a place to bring them.

HJ: I know, but they couldn't all get here, but as many as could came and brought them up here.

MNK: What did you think when you saw that much water? What thoughts were running through your mind as you stood looking out?

(105)

HJ: I was just amazed. I'd never seen anything like it. I've seen several floods, but I'd never seen one as bad as the '77. And I'm amazed that some of these people are saying we're not going to flood again, you know. How can they say that when I've lived through three of them? Are they god? Do they think they can predict there's not going to be another flood. And we've got buildings down there, and we had a terrible time with those after it was over, thick with mud.

MNK: What did you see the next morning when you went downtown?

(112)

HJ: We just walked down through Long Bottom. You couldn't get across the bridge. It was—I've got the picture here showing how it was washed out. The bridge was standing, but you, the approach was all just rocks. It went down in a hurry, but it wasn't down enough to get out of here. I couldn't get out got out and went downtown. He saw it, but I didn't.

MNK: And what did he say about it?

(117)

HJ: Oh, he said that it's just devastated, everything is just devastation. It looked like the town was wiped out. And they were worried about the records in the courthouse, you know, because it had gotten up in the courthouse and they had to get the files, some of those records out and send them to Richmond to be—(noises) That's my lawnmower.

PJ: ... stop.

MNK: If you don't care.

[tape is turned off]

(123)

HJ: My voice is not doing so good.

MNK: So when you finally got downtown, what did things look like to you?

HJ: The first time I went down we drove down, and they wouldn't let us through, that's all. We just had to turn around and come back. I didn't get through. I didn't see much of it. Because they were then trying to clean up, and I just didn't see much. But it was mud in the streets and devastation...that was all. Let me get my breath.

(130)

MNK: So in your lifetime at least, these floods have been getting progressively worse.

HJ: Worse, right.

MNK: And did I hear you say something about the long hand of man working on the mountain tops, the mining and timbering?

(134)

HJ: Well, that's been going on for years, of course. The timbering and the mining too. I don't know what effect that has—I know what effect the timber, but what effect the mining has, I guess it does have some effect on the water. But anyway, I know the floods are getting higher all the time, because my father built those buildings thinking that they wouldn't come any higher than--As one man said, "That high rock theory doesn't hold true very often," because when it goes over that after--Every year it's gone higher. My father never lived to see it get that high.

(142)

MNK: So what is the—what is Grundy's solution to this problem going to be?

HJ: Well, I hope it's going to be that they flood proof it some way however they can.

MNK: Have you heard any discussion of different ideas about that?

(146)

HJ: Yeah, I've heard some that are opposed to it because their, I suppose because of their property. But I don't think—we've got property down there too, but I think it's going to be worthless if another flood comes. We can't or won't be allowed to repair it. And, you know, when the last flood came we had a lot of big mine going here. And they're the ones that helped clean Grundy up. If we have another one, they're out. They're closed down and gone. I don't

know who's going to clean Grundy up. I don't think it would be—It would just be left in a mud hole, sounds like it. I don't see--I think for the good of the town it needs to be flood proofed, however they decide to do it. I don't know what the decision on that is, but I do think that we need something done.

MNK: Great.

(158)

HJ: When I started school, I went to school where the old depot is now, Grundy Depot. And it housed all of the grade school and all of the high school, and I went there. And there was no school buses at that time, so they had a dormitory that was located there on the school grounds. And this was a beautiful orchard. Had apple trees all over it, and they bloomed in the spring. It was beautiful. And the students from the county came in and stayed in this dormitory and went to school instead of having a school bus. And I went to school there until I was in the first year of high school. And it burned that year.

(167)

MNK: That was—the year would have been?

HJ: Well, I was born in 1912, and I went to school when I was six years old. So that would have been in '24, wouldn't it? And then four more years would have been '28. Must have burned about 1928.

MNK: It's a beautiful building. Was—

HJ: It was. It was--

MNK: What was the name of it?

(172)

HJ: Just Grundy High School. It had a basement in it, and it was burned--Coal was used to heat it. And I remember we were all out at recess when we saw smoke coming out the top, and they didn't let us go back in. Everybody was out in the lot on the grounds. And I was crying. I don't know why. Now I wouldn't, but I was crying then. My mother and father had gone to... for the day and left my brother and me to go to school that morning. And they expected to come back. And when they came in and saw--The first thing they saw was the school burned to the ground. It scared them to death. They didn't know whether we were dead or alive. But anyway, then the dormitory didn't bum, and we had to go in there for our classes for the rest of that year. And some of the grade schools were sent out into the churches in the town until they got a new school built. We went to school that way.

(185)

MNK: What a tragedy.

HJ: Well, I've seen several fires and floods in Grundy.

MNK: It's been a real adventurous place to live.

HJ: I guess so. I've got—About 1920...

MNK: Tell me about this picture here.

(188)

HJ: Well, that was taken about the year I was born. That's an old picture showing the town. But it shows a lot more water in the river and in the Slate Creek. But it's a beautiful picture of the way the mountains were not as grown up as they are now.

MNK: I wonder when Grundy was established as a—

(195)

HJ: I don't know, is it on that plaque in the middle of town? I don't—

PJ: Felix Grundy.

HJ: Huh?

PJ: It was named for Felix Grundy, I remember that. HJ: Yeah, it was named for him.

MNK: Felix Grundy.

PJ: Granddaddy came over here in 1905... HJ: '06.

PJ: 1906.

(198)

HJ: He graduated from college, law school, I think in 1905 and came to Buchanan County in 1906.

MNK: Where did he graduate from?

HJ: From University of Virginia Law School. His picture's down there in the courthouse. And he'd gone to school. I got his education all along his picture down there. I put it all on there. And he lived to and died in 1956. So he was a prominent lawyer here for fifty years. He was called Big Combs.

MNK: Called what?

(206)

HJ: Big Combs. He was a big man. There was several Combes that lived here, but we never could establish any kinship with them. But he was the biggest one, so they nicknamed him Big Combs. That's what he—

PJ: He always was Santa Claus at Christmas.

HJ: Yeah, he was nicknamed that.

PJ: No padding.

HJ: He didn't need any padding!

PJ: No.

(tape turned off)

(211)

MNK: Could you say, "My name is?"

PJ: My name is Patrick Johnson. I'm a lifelong resident of Grundy. I've lived here through two floods. And do you want me to talk about—

MNK: Yes, please.

PJ: —the '77, my experience of the '77 flood?

MNK: ...interesting to hear the '77 and the '57...

(217)

PJ: I don't really remember the—I just vaguely remember the '57. I was only five years old when it happened, and I just remember that there was a lot of destruction. And, you know, we didn't have power for a few days, and we couldn't get out of Long Bottom. There's only one bridge in and out here, and it was—Wasn't it a low water bridge, mom?

HJ: Yeah, it was.

(221)

PJ: It was a fairly low water bridge, and it was covered up with debris for several days. And that's really all I remember about the '57. But I have some very vivid memories of the '77 flood. I was here. I was working as a paralegal for what was then Coleman, Robertson and now is Robertson, Cecil and....It's a long-standing law firm here in Buchanan County. And I was working as a paralegal for them trying to, applying to law schools and trying to get in. And been working for them for about eight to ten--I think started in July of '76, and I-I think-

(230)



Wasn't the flood in April of '77? And my mother had been in Florida, and been living here in her house. And I was dating my now wife, Cindy... Johnson, and we had gone to Johnson City with some friends of hers. And it had been raining. And it kept raining and raining, and I remember we were in Johnson City and we parked in a—We went to some sort of music show, and it was crowded. And we had to park—They were parking cars in a field over there. And—Is this more detail than you want?

MNK: ...

(240)

PJ: I tend to ramble on. And it rained while we were in there. We left probably about eleven o'clock, I guess, at night, and this was on a Saturday night. And it was—There was—By the time we got back out there to the field there was so much water and it was so slick the cars were like—It was tearing (telephone ringing) up the field, and it was real muddy, and we were having a very, very difficult time—

(tape turned off)

(245)

MNK: Cars were turned.

PJ: Yeah, they were just, they were spinning mud everywhere and gotten muddy in this field. And it was in sort of a natural dip, and they couldn't get out. We had a difficult time getting out. I remember I had to get out and push the car while Cindy drove it. And we finally got out of there, and we came back to Grundy. It kept raining, raining, raining, and it was a torrential downpour. And then we got back here. And momma was here. She wasn't scheduled to be here until I think the next day, Sunday evening, but she was surprise everyone and gotten here. And she'd come back to Grundy to speak with her accountant, because this was in early April and she always came back here to talk to him about taxes. And her accountant was Mr. Taylow, who's a friend of our family.

(256)

And he was scheduled to arrive the next day on Sunday. And so anyway, it kept raining and raining and raining all day Sunday, Sunday night, and Monday I went to work. And by that time people were becoming alarmed because the water had really started to rise rapidly. And I remember that about noon that day Red Robertson, F.D. Robertson, who was the managing partner in the law firm, he came in and told everyone that, "You all better go home. It looks like we're going to have high water, and we don't know what the extent of it's going to be." So, you know, I was twenty-two or twenty-three years old. I was glad to get off work!

(268)

So I got in my car, and I drove around a little bit to see, you know, what the situation was.

The water was rising all over the town, just around Grundy, not all over the county. The water was rising everywhere. So finally I thought, well, you know, I'd better get home because if

I don't get home, you know, I'm going to end up spending the night up on the mountain or something. I don't want that to happen. So I came up Slate Creek, and by that time the water was really high. And this bridge, which had been rebuilt from the previous floods, was--It wasn't a low water bridge, but it was still--It was not elevated any. It was even with the roadway. It looked to be almost under water. The sides of the bridge were visible, but barely.

(279)

And the part, the roadway part that you would drive on was completely under water. And a neighbor down here, Charles Ratlett, who lived right there at the bridge, he was standing out in his yard. And the water was already starting to cover the road in the lower end of Long Bottom also, as well as the bridge. And I drove by it, and I turned around up the road and came back. And I really thought, well, you know, it looks like I'm a little bit too late. I shouldn't have messed around as long as I did. And Charlie stood in his yard. I rolled the window down, and he said, "You can make it. It's only a couple of inches over the bridge." And he said, "A truck just came over about five minutes ago." So I came over, and I didn't have any trouble. Probably kind of stupid to do that, but, you know, it seemed like the thing to do at the time. And I came on up Long Bottom and then came up here and parked on the hill. And we had several house guests. Carol's sister, Martha, was here. And I'm not really sure why she was here.

?: She brought Helen from the airport.

(297)

PJ: That's right. She brought momma from the airport over in Bristol Saturday night. And that's why they come over Saturday. And Mr. Taylow the accountant was here. And we rented the apartment over there to Edward Matney and his wife. Ed's an attorney now in Grundy.

I don't think he was then. I think he was kind of doing the same thing I was, working as a paralegal. And--Was there anybody else here then, Momma?

HJ: ...

PJ: I think that's it.

HJ: Mr. Taylow.

(304)

PJ: Yeah, I said Mr. Taylow. And then all that evening people--We live on the hillside, and all that evening people who lived down in Long Bottom came up here and asked us if they could park their cars in the, in our driveway because--And that's something I remember about the '57 and the '62 floods also. People would always come up here since we live--We have a long driveway. And our driveway would be full of cars. Excuse me. And then I decided to venture out, and Carol's sister, Martha, wanted to go too. So we put on some--By that time the roadway down here in front of our house was completely covered. It just looked like part of a river as opposed to--There's a small, fairly small creek, and a bank, and then probably about twenty feet or so people's yards and frontage area and places where they park their car.

(319)

And then there's the roadway. And all that from the creek all over to the sides of people's yards was just covered. It looked like a river as opposed to a creek down there. I mean Long Bottom Road was completely covered. So Martha and I set out. And I had a camera. I was a camera buff at the time. I could develop my own pictures, and print them, and stuff. So we went walking down people's yards, because you couldn't walk in the roadway, there was already water in it. And I remember there was somebody's car parked in front of this house. I don't even remember who was living here, it's a rental house that my mother owns right by hers down here. I don't remember who was living there, but they had gone somewhere and their car was sitting there. The water was already—it was still daylight. It was probably about four or five o'clock, and the water was already up to the window, the side windows of it.

(333)

And we were getting ready to come back, and I told Martha that I wanted to take a picture of myself standing by that car in the middle of Long Bottom with the water up to my waist. So I waded out into the water, she took the picture. Later found out, unfortunately, that there was no film in the camera! So we came up here and Momma told me to get bathed because the water was probably going to go off. And so I did, I bathed. And I really went to sleep. And the power went off probably nine or ten o'clock, I guess, that night. I'm kind of a night owl. I took a candle up there and read. And everyone was asleep, and I was up in my room upstairs reading and the candle was all I had to read by. And you could hear pieces of debris crashing into things all night. I mean it wasn't real loud. It's kind of like a real low—

HJ: ... sound.

(347)

PJ: Yeah, but it was something, you know, you weren't used to. But it was kind of like when you hear thunder off in the distance. It was just like large items hitting, you know. You had no idea what it was. Of course I kept going to the window and looking out. All the street lights were out, but you could still see the water was up into our yard. You know, our yard is a slope. It was up into our yard probably twenty or thirty yards, which is higher than I had ever seen it before or since. And, you know, it was pretty scary really. It was—You know, I think at that point—That night right after the power went off is when I began to realize that it was really, you know, this was really going to be a horrendous thing, and it wasn't just something that would get me out of work for a couple of days! And so anyway the next morning we woke up. We sat down here, I think, before we went to bed and played cards with the candlelight with all the people that were here. It was kind of an unusual group.

(362)

It was the kind of people—You know, it was the kind of group, I guess, that gets thrown together in a situation like that sometimes. So, you know, the next morning when we woke up, of course I immediately wanted to see what was going on. The water had subsided some, I believe, by the morning. It'd stopped raining, and the sun was out, I believe. Or there was a lot of fast moving clouds, and it was—it had stopped raining, and the water had subsided. And of course I don't

think momma wanted me to go. She was like cooking steaks. She was cooking all the frozen food in the fireplace.

HJ: ...

PJ: Whatever. Chicken steaks, whatever. She was saying, "We got to eat this food before it thaws out." And I remember eating a steak. I don't remember when it was. I remember eating a steak that had like a real burnt paper taste to it! That's my memory of food during the flood.

HJ: ...

(376)

PJ: So anyway. I don't remember if Martha went with me. I think I went by myself, and I walked all the way to town. And the destruction was unimaginable. I mean it was, you know--There was like sand banks in the road and, you know, house trailers crashed up against buildings. The bridge was totally washed out. There was still--There was a lot traffic moving through Grundy at that point. People were trying to get out. And I remember there was so much debris in the road between what's now Food City and the red light down there that they had to route cars behind Food City.

(388)

They were routing cars behind there to get buy that. There was so much--I think it was because of that little footbridge that used to be across from the junior high. I think that had washed out, and it was, it had deposited itself somewhere down there in front of Food City. And there were all kinds of buildings and things. So anyway I walked down through town. And this was before anybody had gotten here like, you know, National Guard or ... the state police, or any of the coal companies, or any--I mean it was pretty much, you know, exactly as the flood left it. And since most of my work at that time consisted of doing title work in the clerks office in the courthouse, I looked into the courthouse and I could see that the whole bottom floor of the courthouse had been completely flooded. And that was kind of depressing.

(402)

The post office was pretty much wiped out. I walked down the street. All the windows in the street level of just about every building in downtown Grundy was completely blasted out. Walls were knocked out. I remember that--And what was odd about it was the way--It was total destruction up to where the water--You could tell where the water line was, and then above that it was just, it was exactly as it had been left. It was like, you know, totally unchanged. One thing that stands out in memory was the only place in Grundy when I was a kid that you could buy magazines was in the Rexall Drug Store. They got all the magazines. They got every magazine imaginable.

HJ: And comic books.

(414)

PJ: And comic books. They had a whole wall of magazines and comic books. And they came in every Thursday, the new ones did, I remember that. And I went in there, and they had the—I wouldn't call them porno, I guess you'd call them girlie mags. They were, you know, Playboy and that sort of thing. They weren't pornographic, they were just those, you know, girlie magazines. And they always kept them on the top shelf, I guess to keep them away from kids. And they were up there on the top shelf and, which was right next to the ceiling because it was a whole wall. And I remember that all the magazines had been wiped out except that last row of girlie magazines on the top was exactly as they had been. The whole store was wiped out except for the girlie magazines on top.

(428)

And I remember thinking, that's strange. You'd think if the wrath of god came through here that they'd have wiped out the girlie magazines! And so anyway—And I remember the barbershop. I think it's a beauty shop. It used to be called Davis' Barbershop on the corner, and there was a beauty shop right by it. The whole wall had been knocked out of that. The water had come through there, and gone through the front, and knocked the whole wall out. And like on one side you had, you know, all this barber and beautician stuff and on the other side it was just like, you know, you looked out and there was nothing there. Yeah, there's a picture of it in that magazine. That was real strange looking.

(440)

I walked through Grundy, and I walked up on the footbridge over to what's now the town offices over there at the old depot. And I walked across that bridge. I was taking photographs. Black and white film was all I had. I remember that. I was taking a lot of black and white photographs. I made sure I had film in my camera this time. And there were a lot of cars overturned down there on the back road. And I walked around. And it was just incredible destruction everywhere. I mean it was unbelievable. There were whole, what I consider to be solid buildings. I guess they were, you know, like a double-wide trailer, whatever. And they were just gone. They weren't there anymore. And there weren't many people in town. Except there were some people getting out. So I walked back home, and I got back up there where they were routing the vehicles around Food City, and I saw Jerry Coleman, who was the guy I worked for. It was Robertson, Coleman. Coleman, Robertson at that time. And I saw Jerry, and he's the guy I worked directly under. And Jerry—I asked him, I said, "Jerry, what, you know, what are we going to do?" And he said, "Just get out of here. That's what I'm doing." He had a house, or trailer, or something over at the lake, Holston Lake. He said, "I'm going to the lake over at Holston." And I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "My mother's here, and I'm sure she's going to get back to Florida as soon as possible." He said, "Well, you go with here. You go on and get out of here.

We're not going to be working for a long time." And so I think that the enormity of it hit me at that point. I really felt like, golly, you know, this—You know, if we're not going to be working for a while, who knows. You know, the town may dry up and blow away or whatever. So I came back home, and we muddled through up here for the next twenty-four hours. And, you know, with mom cooking the frozen food in the fireplace and that sort of thing.

(476)

We had a lot of trouble with the commodes flushing and all that sort of thing. And there's no power of course. And later that day I got—we were totally cutoff, absolutely no communication at all. And my wife, now my wife, she was my girlfriend then, she was living over at Belfast. She was going to Southwest Community College. And of course, you know, it's kind of like in a disaster movie or something. You don't have any idea about—I mean, you know, the rest of the world may be, you know, blown away, or washed away, or whatever. You had no idea that, of what might have happened elsewhere. And I was pretty concerned about her even though I don't think that's the sort of area that would flood with the sort of violence that we saw here during the flood. But I was worried about her.

(492)

So I decided I was going to drive over there. And I don't remember how I got in touch with a friend of mine. I.D.... (?sp.) said, "Well, I'll ride over there with you and we can see what the situation is up the road anyway." So I.D. and I started out about dark that night. This was the day after the flood. Again, we drove right through Grundy. And—I mean, you know, we had to take several detours. There were huge chunks of road missing. And we got up there on the four-lane highway between Deal and Shorts Gap, and there were just like huge chunks of road missing. I mean—And there was no, you know—There hadn't been enough time to put anything, any signs, or have anybody up there, any barricades, or anything. I mean you'd be rolling along and, you know, all of a sudden the road would just be gone. So you had to proceed very cautiously.

(509)

And we went around—You know, like you would have to drive on the wrong side of the four lane up there. You know the bend right down from that food store, and that wasn't—There's a food store there now. That big bend and how they dug out the top of it, that whole portion of the road was missing where the river came down and hit that and went around. It was just completely missing. You had to go up on the hill on like—There was a little dirt road around the hill, and you had to go around there to get around there. And I remember at least two or three places where you had to go into the other lane, you know, the other four lane. Like the inside, the part away from the river was still there, and you had to go over into that and of course just hoping that no one else would come along going the other way, you know. But there wasn't much traffic out at night! Nobody with much sense would have been out, I don't think. So we muddled on over there to Richlands. Okay.

(528)

MNK:

PJ: Do you want me—Is your arm getting tired?

MNK: ... no.

(529)

PJ: Okay. We muddled on over there to Richlands. It took us probably two or three hours to get over there. And we got over there, and we went to Sandy's apartment. She lived there with

two other girls from Buchanan County. And I remember telling her, well, Grundy's—And she of course was very concerned about what was going on over here and, because they'd heard all kinds of wild rumors that Grundy was completely gone, there was nothing there. It was like a, you know, a scene of like nuclear devastation or something, just completely blown away. And I said, "Well, you know, a lot of the structures are still there." And I said, "Grundy will never be the same."

(541)

This is, you know—it's going to completely change everything you know about Grundy." And I remember she started crying and, you know, and got really upset. And I had to try to calm her down. I felt at that time I probably shouldn't have been so frank. And of course she was worried about her mother and father, who lived up in the Convict Hollow down at Maxie down at Harmon. And I hadn't heard from them and wouldn't—I hadn't been down the river from Grundy. And supposedly, you know, the devastation down that way was enormous. There was all kinds of debris in the road, and there was sand. Anyway, I.D. and I stayed over there a while. As we got ready to leave we walked out of their apartment and it had gotten all of a sudden—Within the last six or eight hours, I guess, it had gotten real cold and it started snowing. And I remember thinking, man, you know, somebody up there doesn't like our area! Because this is almost too much, you know.

(563)

And it was early April and, you know, of course snow in this area in early April is not unheard of, but we'd just had all this massive rain for days and days. So anyway, I.D. and I got in the car and came back, which, you know, again, I don't know why I was doing all this traveling, but it seemed perfectly natural for me at the time. And we came back. Of course we knew where all the holes in the road were on the way back, so I think we got back a little quicker. And we got back, and we went to bed. When we got up the next morning, I think it was the next morning, I'm pretty sure it was the next morning, mom said, you know, "We got to get out of here," you know. "We're running out of food, you know. The sanitary conditions are really poor, you know. We're having a hard time flushing all the commodes and stuff." We got a lot of people in the house.

At this point Mr. Taylow, he was ready—He lived in—I think he lived in Bristol. He lived in the tri-cities area. He said he was leaving. It was kind of like everybody was going to pack up and get out of here.

(584)

Again, there was no phones. There was no TV. I don't even think the radio station was on. We lived in an area where, at that time anyway, no matter what kind of radio you had you couldn't pick up any other radio station other than the Grundy station because of the mountains. And I believe the radio station had even, was failing to transmit. I'm not sure, but there was like—There was just—Everybody—Nobody knew what was going on. So we got packed up. I believe that Martha—Martha was living in—Was she living in Abingdon?

(598)

???: She was either in Abingdon or Richmond. She picked Helen wherever she came in. Helen said Richmond the other day, but I think she might have been—

PJ: I believe that's right. I believe Martha was coming to Grundy for some reason.

???: ...

PJ: And she flew to Richmond and rode to Grundy with Martha.

???: ...

(603)

PJ: Anyway, we decided to go to Bristol and take our chances, and Martha was going to go on back to Richmond. And we would just camp out at the airport until we got a plane back to Florida. That's how mom had gotten here. So we left the house, and we drove into Grundy. And we got down here right at the—it's where the old... Motel used to be down there.

???: ...

(614)

PJ: Right, behind Benny Early's house. And the state police were down there stopping cars. And—

???: ...

PJ: We were in a long line of cars there, and we kept seeing all the cars that were in front of us. Each one as they would pull up and talk to the troopers they would turn around and go back. So we were sitting there. Do you not want me to tell this part, Momma?

HJ: No....Go ahead. (628)

PJ: And so we—it was becoming fairly obvious that we were not going to be able to pass through Grundy. And this is probably the second day after the flood. And, you know, it surprised me because the day before, you know, everybody and their uncle was driving through Grundy and walking through Grundy. They weren't letting anyone into downtown Grundy because of, I guess, I understand later to be because of the worry about disease, and also they were trying to clear some of it out by that point, I guess. So my mother was desperate to get back to Florida, and when she wants to go somewhere it's hard for even the state police to hold her back. So we pulled up there. He said, you know, "You can't go through downtown Grundy. I'm sorry, you're going to have to turn around and go back to your home and stay in your home until you hear something further." So as Martha pulled up to turn around, momma said, "Martha, go. Go on. I'm not going back to my house."

HJ: We went out the other way.

(648)



PJ: You know, eventually, after the police let us down we did. And so anyway, Martha peeled out, and we started out to downtown Grundy. And anyway, the policeman, I don't remember who he was—He was a guy that was here locally, I remember that. He got in his car, and came after us, and turned the light on, and pulled us over down there about the red light in Grundy. He was kind of upset. He said, "What the—" I remember he walked over to the car and said to Martha, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" And mom said, "We got to get out of Grundy, that's what we're doing."

HJ: She said we had to go to the doctor.

(664)

PJ: Yeah, I think Martha did say she had to go to the doctor. And he said, "Well, you're not going this way. Now you turn around and go back to your house or I'm going to have to, you know, put you in jail," or something like that, which I don't think he was going to do that. And I don't—I think, you know, obviously he was doing his job, and we were certainly not doing what we were supposed to be doing! But we wanted to get out of here. So we turned around, and we started back to the house. And I said—

(675)

HJ: I said, "There's more ways than one to get out of Grundy."

PJ: There's more ways than one to get out of Grundy.

HJ: And we went this way.

(678)

PJ: And we went up Slate Creek and went over Helm Creek. And I was worried about getting out that way because, I mean that's a back, a real small back road. And, you know, one-lane road essentially. And, you know, I'd been to Richlands the day before on the four-lane highway out of here, and it was barely passable. And so I was—I felt like as we left—I certainly was game to try to go out that way, but I felt like probably we were not going to get out that way because there would be, that road would be blocked somewhere. But luckily as you leave that way going over—

(694)

HJ: We stopped at Rife's Store...

PJ: Right. We stopped up there at Rife's Store, and they said they thought it was clear.

HJ: Somebody had just come across.

PJ: That somebody had just come across coming this way. So we went up and the first half of it probably is going up a mountain and coming down a mountain.

(Side Two)

PJ: The first half of it probably is going up a mountain and coming down a mountain. So we didn't have any problem, you know. I mean it was not—There was some big culverts and things in the road from all the drainage, but, you know, it was—There was no problem at all. Then we got down there before you come out at Contrary. There was some debris and things in the road, but nothing like what had been in downtown Grundy and what I had seen the day before. And we got through there fairly easily without much—

HJ:... went through a creek bed.

(007)

PJ: We had to go through one creek bed, I think. But they had already—There was some kind of debris in the road, and they had already—It had already been traveled. It wasn't like we were blazing a new trail. They had already—There was car tracks and stuff down through the creek bed out of there. And we got out of there and I remember we came out up there at Contrary, and there was like a, I guess you would call it today like a flea market kind of situation with people selling Coleman stoves and stuff at like outrageous markups. They had gone over to Bluefield and Bristol and bought these Coleman stoves for about probably fifty dollars, and they were selling them for like three or four hundred dollars over there. Profiteering! And we drove on to Bristol that day and got on an airplane, and we were in Florida by that night. And I stayed down there for a couple of weeks.

(016)

???: ...

PJ: Well, I'm wrapping it up here, Carol. And came back. And of course there was still a lot of damage. It took six months or a year to get back to a semblance of normalcy. And—

???: Some of it's never gotten back to normal.

PJ: Well, but some of it was improved too, I think. And, you know—

???: ...

(022)

PJ: I'll say this, I was here for the resurrection, as it were, and the—If we'd have relied on—This is my opinion, of course. If we had relied on the National Guard and the Federal Disaster, and the State, and all that stuff, it never would have gotten back the way it was. The reason that Grundy was rehabilitated in the way it was was because in 1977 it was right at the end of the coal boom.

(027)

And there was more money in Buchanan County at that point than I think ever has been or ever will be again. And all these coal companies, they had a lot of heavy equipment in here, and they moved in and took over. And they did at least as much—Not—I mean I'm not disparaging the efforts of the state and federal people, and money, and equipment, and everything. It's just that it

was such an overwhelming thing that it would have taken them three or four times as long to do it if all these coal companies hadn't had all this heavy equipment and been able to really aid them in doing it. And—

MNK: Which, I gather, is not the case now.

(036)

PJ: No. In fact, almost all of those companies at that time were locally owned. ... was owned by a group of people here and in Knoxville, Tennessee. United Coal Company was owned by all Buchanan County people. It had been started by a group of men from Buchanan County. Island Creek was owned by, was... creek, but it was owned by—They were from, I think, Huntington and Knoxville. And now all those companies are owned by large—They all sold out sometime between then and now to—... sold out to Sun Oil, Island Creek to Consol and, to Occidental and then Consol. And United just recently has sold out to A. T. Massey. And, you know, I'm not saying these people wouldn't, these groups wouldn't be civic minded, I just don't think they would have the same sort of dogged determination to get things back to the way they were as the local people did at that time. And that's pretty much it, I guess, unless you got some questions.

(051)

???: ...

PJ: Am I?

???: And if his brother was here, you could have another earful!

PJ: Right.

MNK: Can you—Could you comment briefly, because I don't want to take your whole day either, on how the protection, flood protection plan has evolved in the aftermath of the '77 flood?

(055)

PJ: Well, at some point—I graduated from law school in 1981, so, and I came back here to Grundy. And at some point during, probably '82, or '83, or somewhere in there. No, it was after '83 because we were in our new office, and we moved in there in August of '83. Someone came and asked me, said they were distributing questionnaires from the Army Corps, I think, about potential, you know, remedies for the flood.

(062)

And I filled out the—For building owners. And of course my family owns several buildings in the Grundy area. And I filled out—I think I filled out questionnaires for every one of the buildings. And then we didn't hear anything for a long time. You know, it was just one of those things. I kind of forgot about it. And then sometime probably about 1989 or '90, I guess, Ed..., who was the, on the Town Council asked me if I would like to serve on the, on some kind of coordinating

committee to arrive at a solution with the Army Corps, and the Virginia Department of Transportation, and all these different groups. In other words, represent the interest of the town of Grundy. And I told them I would, that I felt that I would like to have some input on it. And, you know, we started meeting, and there were a lot of very—The people that were involved were all really conscientious citizens, and I think highly of all of them. They all—

(074)

A lot of them had different interests as to what they wanted to see done. And, you know, I think we were able to arrive at a fairly consistent, a consensus opinion of what needed to be done. And there was some minor disagreement about it. And then that all kind of went, and we didn't hear anything about that for a while, didn't meet for several years. And then that's when I think the Virginia Department of Transportation got involved. And it was—The idea was floated that, you know, if VDOT could supply the, what they call local funding, then this project could go forward. I think the Army Corps and VDOT found out they had a common interest. And that was that VDOT was going to put a highway through here anyway and so if they could combine it with a flood protection program that the Army Corps had been talking about, they could, you know, some way—I don't remember it all, the ins and outs of it, but they could combine and get the funding and basically get it done. And that's about the time—We had some massive meeting in, at...State Park.

(087)

It was like every politician within three states was there! And they fed us dinner, and we talked about it all day. And then that was about the last thing I took part in. VDOT always seemed reluctant to commit that kind of money in a lump sum. I think what they wanted to do was, you know, because it would like basically eat up their whole budget for a year to commit that kind of money. So that was the problem when I got off the program. And that's—I think—My opinion, I think something needs to be done, because as I said earlier in my narrative, I don't think that—If any kind of flood like this ever happens again, and we had a—As you can see from the pictures my mother's provided here, we had a fairly severe flood in 1962. But if any flood of the nature of the '57 flood or the '77 flood were to ever happen to this town again, it would never be rebuilt. It would just be—It would devastate the entire community. And—

(100)

???: ...

PJ: Okay. Is that all you want?

HJ: ...

PJ: Mom wants me to wave off.

HJ: I think you've covered it all.

PJ: Okay.

(103)

MNK: I've heard one person speak about the—I'm interested in the new Grundy and issues of ownership. And I've heard the idea mentioned in conjunction with that. Can you throw some light on how all that might work out...

HJ: ...

(108)

PJ: Industrial Development Authority. I've really not thought that through. That's the sort of thing that, in my mind, and I'm not—I wouldn't feel comfortable commenting on that with an specificity. I would say that to me that's sort of a thing that could be worked out if everyone determines this is what we're going to do. And I don't know about the ownership. My personal opinion is I don't think there's any business, and by business I don't mean bank or attorney's office, or accountant's office, I mean retail, walk in a store business in downtown Grundy that is flourishing at this time. I think there may be businesses that are viable and businesses that are making a profit, but I wouldn't say they were flourishing simply because of the number of conditions. And, you know, I think change is always difficult.

(120)

And of course people would rather sometimes remain in a bad situation that they're familiar with than change into something that they're unfamiliar with. And I think that's the phenomenon that's occurring in a lot of these people's mind now. When I was an attorney, a lot of times I would be in a situation where I would counsel battered women who would be afraid to leave their husbands. And I would always tell them, "You need to get out of that situation. No one should have to endure this, and this is not a normal situation." And they were always reticent to do that because, in my opinion, as I said, they would rather stay in a bad situation they were familiar with than change into the unknown. And almost invariably when they would leave they would come back to me and tell me, "I'm so glad that I got out of that. That's the smartest thing I ever did. I can't believe I stayed in that situation as long as I did." And I think that's... of the situation in Grundy right now. I think we're in a bad situation,

(132)

a potentially disastrous situation if another flood comes along, and I think that if we would go ahead and endure the trauma of changing it for five or seven years or however long it's going to take, I think we're going to find a vastly improved Grundy, and hopefully a thriving community here.