

Michael Kline: You can say "My name is."

Chuck Crabtree: My name is Chuck Crabtree.

MK: Your date of birth?

CC: April 4th, 1952.

MK: Tell me just a little bit about your people, where you were raised.

CC: Born and raised right here in Buchanan County. My family was originally from West Virginia, moved down to Grundy in the late 1920s. My grandfather came down with the coal mining industry. He was one of the first contractors for Harman Mining Corporation at Harman, Virginia. He actually mined coal with ponies and pulled the coal out of the mountains with small ponies.

MK: Where did they live? Did they live in a camp or did they live in town?

CC: Actually, they lived in a small camp. It was the houses in this little area. They were six, seven that were owned by the Harman Mining Corporation. They were company houses. He lived in one of those, and then later on purchased the house from Harman. They were originally from Big Creek in West Virginia is the area they came from before they came here.

MK: Before that?

CC: Before that, from Illinois area and also Tennessee area – Rockwood, Tennessee area.

MK: Illinois?

CC: Yes.

MK: I always think of all that developments going from east to west, but I did not know it was [inaudible].

CC: No.

MK: A little bit about your own coming up.

CC: As I said, I was raised here in Grundy, in Buchanan County. My father was in the mining business and mining industry, too. He was an engineer. His engineering education came from own hands. He did not have a degree in engineering, but there wasn't anything that he couldn't do. He retired with Allen Creek Coal Corporation as their chief field engineer, which his responsibilities included all the gas wells that Allen Creek had. If a mine was to catch on fire, his responsibilities were knowing where to drill and how to put the fires out. He was on the early stages of all the new methane gas lines that they're taking out of here now that CONSOL is doing. He was in on that groundwork. From there, the reason he retired – he really didn't want

to retire, but his eyesight started failing, and then he had to retire. He has retired now and lives in Bristol, Tennessee. My mother was from this area also. She was raised on Convict town.

MK: Convict?

CC: Convict Hollow. It's in the lower end of Buchanan County towards Harman, Virginia. It actually had a Convict Camp in the head out. That's how it got its name. Her parents were from West Virginia also. They inaugurated here due to the mining industry and the logging industry. I have one sister. She's four years older than I am. She moved away about twenty years ago. But myself, I'm not leaving. I love Grundy and Buchanan County.

MK: You graduated from high school here?

CC: Yes, sir. I went to Harman Elementary School. I went to the junior high, Grundy Junior High School here in Grundy. Then I also graduated from Grundy Senior High School and attended Southwest Virginia Community College, which is all local here.

MK: Then?

CC: Then I spent my early days – my first job is actually where with the coal industry again. I spent the first five years of my work and career after being married to a beautiful young lady here in Grundy also with United Coal Companies when they first started back in the early [19]70s. I was with United until right after the [19]77 flood. From there, I went into private – I wanted to go in business for myself and was in and out of different several businesses and was very successful at those businesses and had the opportunity that most people did not have in life is I got to do exactly what I wanted to do. If I wanted to try this business, I tried it. It was successful. Then if I had an interest in something else, I tried it. I did it. It was successful. I got an education.

MK: Were you able to get into community arts, for example?

CC: Yes, yes. The Lord has blessed me with a lot of talents as far artistic ability and a creative mind. I've got to use it all over my years. Most people have to do one job all their life. If it's at pharmacy or pharmacist or whatever they stand in, count pills every day. They spend a lot of time in college and a lot of money just to count pills. I've been very fortunate. I've got to experience life. I've got to experience different type of businesses, everything from owning a flower shop to – I did my apprenticeship as a mortician here in town, in Grundy with one of the local funeral homes. I've owned and operated a convenience store. I was in the purchasing department of the United Coal Company and the coal industry. So, I've actually had the opportunity to learn and experience, which is something that most people do not have the opportunity to do. It's an education in itself. It's more valuable to me and what I do now than anything that you can learn at college or from a book. Everything I've done in the past has actually focused me to what I do now. Just as if you're doing a dinner reception for the town or the IDA, my past experience as a florist in designing to set those, this all feeds together and makes it work. I give the Lord all the credit for that because he's guided and directed me in what I'm doing. I feel like that's the reason that I'm still here and I'm doing what I'm doing to be able

to take my experiences and not from a book. But from actual hard knocks experience and education to put it to use to better the town and the community and the people that are here.

MK: Where were you living in early 1977?

CC: Early 1977, actually I was living here in Grundy. I had a home at Harman, Virginia that when my grandmother passed away, it was left to me. We're in the process of remodeling that house. We were living with my mother-in-law, which is in the (corporation and it's at?) Grundy. She also owns a restaurant here in town. That restaurant is probably – or is the oldest restaurant in Grundy that's still going. We were living right here in Grundy in early [19]77.

MK: Was that early April or was that a particularly wet time?

CC: Early April was always a wet time. The reason I know this is my birthday is April 4th – or April 3rd. The flood of [19]77 actually hit the 3rd and the 4th. As long as I can remember, it's always raining on my birthday. I can't remember it not raining on an April 3rd. So, early April is always wet.

MK: This particular one?

CC: This particular one, as I said I was working with United Coal Company. I had been at Duke University Hospital, having some test run at that time. I flew back in to (Richmond's airport?) on April the 1st. I came back home. It was raining. The water was rising. So, I was home. I wasn't working during that time due to the fact of an illness I had. But it brings back a lot of memories, being it your birthday and being the destruction that happened on that time.

MK: What happened that morning then?

CC: On the morning of the 4th or the morning of the 3rd, both days have a lot of memories to me. My wife was attending Southwest Virginia Community College. She was taking a nursing program. The water was coming up. I advised her not to go that day, but she went anyway. She didn't miss any days of school. When she got to school, the college (had school off?) due to the fact of the rain and the flooding. She turned around to come back home. She got part of the way back in. She did get a message to my mother-in-law to let me know that she was on the other end of town staying with a friend. When the water got up, there was no way to come from the lower end of Grundy to the upper end of Grundy. So, we were separated with no phone lines, no power, no water, no sewage. After a restless night, not knowing where she was really at and with all the destruction that was going on at Grundy at that time. I did have my son and my mother-in-law and my sister-in-laws. They were with us at the house, but my wife, Vicky, was not there. So, at daybreak on April 4th, just as soon as it got up that you could see a little bit, I proceeded to walk from the lower end of Grundy Corporation, which is a mile from Downtown Grundy, walking by myself, looking at all the damage. As it being cold on that April morning, the water was just a little bit warm. There's a little bit of steam coming off from it. The mud was steaming. Trees, cars, it was total destruction. I came on through. There's a few people (stirring?) that morning, not a lot, but a few people at that time coming through Downtown Grundy. The mud was about to your knees, a little above. It was real slick mud, tight mud that

if you walk and you put your foot down in it, it would actually suck your shoes right off your feet because it wouldn't let go when you went down into the mud. I proceeded through town and I couldn't believe the devastation that was there. I went on through and made it up to what they call Watkins Branch, the upper part of Grundy and rural city area, which is another mile, mile and a half from Downtown Grundy. So, I've walked just about three miles. I was able to locate my wife. She was with one of her friends and my friends, (Dave Evans's?) house. She spent the night with them. Then I got her and we came back home. To actually see your town and the area that you've raised in, the destruction was totally unreal. You really couldn't comprehend that this had really happened. It's easy to sit and watch it on TV and watch the other towns and the other people and you say, "Well, I kind of feel sorry for those people." But when it's actually happening to you, it's actually your property or your home or your family or your town, there's no comparison. People can't judge what you see on TV or in a movie compared to when it's really there. My wife, she couldn't – I don't know. It was hard for her. It was harder for me to see her the way she was because as we walked through town, she cried the whole time. You walk for two miles in mud and it's hard to stand up. It's slick. Most of the time, if you fell or somebody fell, you'd kind of chuckle at them and go on. But this time, you don't chuckle. This is serious. This is real. This is happening. It's not a movie. It's not the newspapers. It's not someone else's town. It's your town. It's your home. So, walking through town, we didn't say a lot, not to each other. You just look and everywhere you look, there was more destruction. Cars turned upside down, trees and logs sticking through windows. Trucks sitting on the side of the road with trees on top of them that were three or four feet in diameter. Bridges gone, no windows and storefronts. Actually, the whole sides of the building was gone with the whole interior exposed to the elements. You can't comprehend unless you've been there. There's no way anyone can tell you what to expect or how to prepare yourself for it until you actually go through that.

MK: You could probably almost taste the mud.

CC: Oh, yes. You could taste it. You could smell it. Flood mud, as we call it, has a smell. It's a slimy mud. It's a moldy, musty mud. So, it's one of those situations that you never forget. It's just like as if you work into police work or the funeral service work or the ambulance service work, flood mud has a distinct smell. If you ever smelt a burnt body, it has a distinct – you can't – if you ever smell a burnt body, you never forget it. If you ever picked the scent up, you know exactly what it is. When you have a flood that size and that type, you know it. You smell it. It has a distinct smell as in a burnt body. So, I don't know. It's hard to describe exactly what it's like. But we made it home through town. To listen to my wife tell her mom what downtown looked like, I guess as far as my mother-in-law's home, we were very, very fortunate. The water got up all around her home, but it just got up to the rafters underneath the house. At that time, my wife and I did own another little business. It was a little clothing store business. A little wood frame building, A-frame type building, and it was on the banks of the Levisa. To watch your building and your business actually float, the water got up and the building floated, it rocked. It floated, rocked. Thanks to the good Lord, the water stopped. As the water receded, the building rocked and it went right back over the bank. When the water was down and it was all over and done with, the building was probably about a foot on the front side and about six feet down over the bank on the back side. So, I had a building that's sitting on the bank at a slope, of about a forty-five degree slope ready to tumble on over into the river. So, we know what it's like

to lose in the flood. We know what it's like to actually have to rebuild from the flood. I'm sure that most people has been through floods. Until you actually shovel flood mud, you don't know what it's like. It's indescribable.

MK: Tell me about the Levisa Fork as though it were someone you knew. Does it have a character like that that you could talk about?

CC: Yes. The Levisa River has a lot of character to it. When you got up to the age that you could ride a bicycle, mom and dad let you head out, you always go down to the river to fish. You take your bicycle and your fishing pole and your night crawlers and off you went. Or get you some [inaudible] and you're headed to the river to fish. It all started back when one of my next-door neighbors used to take all the kids in the neighborhood on a Friday night or a Saturday night. You'd head out to the local fishing hole, which was down behind Hardee's now. Hardee's wasn't there at that time. It was one of the deepest holes in the river. You'd wash them with you. You'd actually catch enough fish to feel the wash of it. You take the fish home and have fish fried. But as time changes and over the years like everything else does, the water isn't the same. The river isn't the same and times aren't the same. Later on in life, we moved to Harman Junction area. Mom did move. We actually lived on the river then. The river was a playground. It was a playground for all the kids in the neighborhood. We spent so much time on the river with one of the boys in the neighborhood. His name was (Curtis Hess?) or Junior Hess, excuse me. Curtis was his brother. It was Junior. His father was one of the local doctors and one of the owners of the Grundy Hospital here in town. We spent so much time on the Levisa River that Curtis could actually stand in the water and not move for hours, and he'd catch a fish with his bare hands. A lot of people probably wouldn't believe that, but I've watched him stand there for hours. I mean, we'd sit down and watch him, and he'd catch fish. Sooner or later, he'd stand there. His hands in the water, bent over, and have them ready, cupped together, ready to grab it. At the right time, the fish would go through and he'd get it. So, the Levisa has a lot of room, which to me – not only when she showed her mighty force, but also in the calm and peaceful times. Mud turtles, catching those, crown heads. But we lived on the river. We respected it. We enjoyed it and we feared it. So, it has all the emotions that the river brings with it, even back when it would freeze solid. It doesn't do that too often now, but it used to freeze solid and you'd have to skate on the river. Now, today's kids rollerblade and roller skate. But back then we ice skated just with shoes. You didn't have ice skates. You actually just skated with your own shoes. So, the river changes, we changed, and grew up. We were living on the river – at Harman Junction in [19]57 when the [19]57 flood hit. I could remember we lived in an apartment on the second floor of the apartment. You can look out the windows and actually see the river. I could remember in [19]57, I was just a little kid, but the memories of seeing the old milk jugs and the bleach bottles. The amazing thing that got me is all the basketballs and all the balls going on the river. I wanted those balls. I thought we can net those balls and everybody in the whole neighborhood had balls. But we never could get them because mom or dad wouldn't let you near the river when it was up. So, the river has a lot of history, calm, peaceful, good memories, and bad memories. It's part of our heritage here in Grundy. But there's one thing about the river, the Levisa River. She always gets in your way no matter what you do. The buildings are there or not there. When she comes, she comes hard and she comes forceful. You go out in the Midwest, in Mississippi, the other rivers, you have a lot of back water. The water rises and it might take it two, three, four, five, even a week for it to crest. Then you've got the

same thing when it starts receding. You might wait another week or two weeks for it to recede back down. But the Levisa, she's altogether different. Within forty-eight hours, she can come and she can go. You don't have time to put sandbags up. You don't have time to do this or do that. When she starts rising and the water doesn't start coming down, you'd better shut your flood doors and pull out. We're not fortunate in one way as they are in the Midwest and other places. It's sad that they do flood. We know what they go through, but at least they do have time to prepare. I've had people asked me and says, "Well, how much warning do you have? Why don't you prepare for these floods?" If a stormfront comes through and that front happens to decide to come north or south and it's got a real punch to it, it can drop upstream maybe seven inches of rain. Then that seven inches of rain time if it's dropped at the right place, at the right location, you don't have time to put sandbags up. Only you have time to do is put a few belongings you got in the vehicle and maybe move them to the third floor of a building if you have a third floor and cover your tail and run. Because you don't have that liberty of time to wait.

MK: So, Grundy has suffered severely in [19]37, [19]57, and [19]77, [19]83. What is the solution? What is the town going to do about this?

CC: Well, we can sit here and do nothing for one thing. But doing nothing is not going to correct or solve the problem. We can sit and say, "It's definitely going to rain again to the extent of flooding." I guess we had a direct line to the good Lord. We could answer that question, but God has its way with Mother Nature, and we can't predict that. As far as Grundy goes, we have an opportunity before as right now that this – an opportunity that most of the nation would love to have. By the wonderful works of the corps of engineers out of the Huntington District with the wonderful job of the Virginia Department of Transportation is doing with our congressman's and our senators and our representatives, we have an opportunity as a small town that by the cooperation of the federal government, state government, and local government to make a change for Grundy. As far as the Levisa River goes, I don't think anyone wants to take away its beauty. We don't want to try to take away its force. We don't want to try to take away its peacefulness. We have the opportunity to let her go on as she has for centuries and centuries. We have an opportunity to take our town and make it a better place. The buildings that are on the Levisa Fork that are in the bend of the river, these buildings are old. They're dilapidated. It's like anything else with time and age. It gets best of everything. The buildings aren't going to be able to withstand or force much more. With the corps of engineer and their unique abilities to make things happen and change, we have an opportunity to put our town on the other side of the river, out of the bend of the river, out of the hundred-year flood plan, and develop something that no other town has had the opportunity to do. With Grundy being a coal mining town and all our lives have depended on coal, but at a point, it's just like everything else with time. Our coal reserves are not what it used to be. We have approximately ten to twelve years of coal reserves left in Grundy, in Buchanan County. With the opportunity of the corps and Virginia Department of Transportation has given us, we have a golden opportunity to diversify, to rebuild, to make our town grow, to give us property that we never had before to develop, to give our children a future, and something to look forward – to hope, to look forward to. For the residents that do live on the river, it gives them an opportunity, a chance to lie down at night and not worry about their businesses and not worry about their homes being flooded. Until you're flooded and every time it rains and it rains hard, you're up. It's like an alarm clock. I think the peace of mind that

people received in this project is worth every penny you could put into it to protect not only homes, businesses, but also lives. You have an opportunity for new roads, new buildings, new parks. This just goes on. It's just a wonderful project. To me, it's a blessing from God that we have it, and we have an opportunity to make it happen. It wouldn't happen if weren't for the cooperation between the corps of engineers and Virginia Department of Transportation and our local government and the people that's been behind it and making it happen, including Congressman Rick Boucher. Congressman Boucher has done a wonderful job to make this project happen. He spent a lot of time, a lot of effort into it, along with one of our delegates. It's no longer there now. It's Delegate Don McLaughlin. This was one of his first project that he worked on many, many years ago. Due to his work then we are still reaping benefits from when he was in office. So, it's just a combination of everybody working together, making a better place for our community and our people.

MK: What is Grundy's part financially going to be in this?

CC: It's another blessing from God. Usually, it would be about 25 percent of what the flood proofing project would cost. With some brilliant minds and brilliant people, we have the opportunity. As far as Grundy, our finances are not the best in the world. We are financially stable right now, which we still have a good coal left. Things are going to change down the road. We have to get creative. But with the Virginia Department of Transportation working with the corps of engineers, Route 460 coming through Grundy is a federal highway system. It runs through Kentucky. Kentucky has a section at Route 460. It's not (four-laned?). As well as Virginia has a section of 460. It's not four-laned. Kentucky is taking theirs towards the Elkhorn City area near the Breaks Interstate Park. Virginia is going to take theirs through Grundy, and hopefully, take it down to Elkhorn City, Kentucky and tie it in with the Breaks Interstate Park. This project has been going on for a long time. But taking these two projects and seeing a vision of the future, both states, Kentucky and Virginia, and VDOT and the corps of engineers, by taking this road and four-lane it through Grundy and using the flood project together, when VDOT buys and has to do property acquisitions for the road, the federal government and the corps of engineers had agreed to let that acquisitions be Grundy's portion of the project. So, by doing that, that relieves Grundy of the financial burdens that they would have to pick up. For a small town, it only operates off from million a year budget. To come up with \$25 to \$30 million for this project, it would've been almost impossible for us to do. A matter of fact, it would be impossible for us to do. Financially, we couldn't do it. But with the help and the cooperation of VDOT and the federal government and the state officials and our congressmen on and on and on again, they make this project happen. It shows that federal government, state government, and local government can work together to make projects happen. It falls down to the simple thing as cooperation and working together – different parts of our government working together to make something like this happen. The strange thing of it is even though it's an expensive project that's actually costing everyone less because VDOT, it reduces their cost on the project by working with the corps. It reduces the town's cost and the corps of engineer's cost because the road that will be coming through it will actually as a levy for the town that helps the corps without having to build a floodwall. It helps VDOT having a place to put the four-lane, and the four-lane is actually the levy. So, it's just a wonderful project. It's a genius of a project. I'm just, as a resident of Grundy, proud to just be a small part of it. I commend everyone that had the foresight and the vision to make it happen this way, and it's just wonderful.

MK: Describe how the levying will protect the oldest portion of the town that includes the courthouse and Walnut Street, then how the new town is going to be on the other side of that system.

CC: In the bend of the river, in Levisa River is where Grundy's heart is located. As the town stands now, you have a row of buildings that row around that bend. So, when the Levisa gets up, the force hits the buildings straight on. By taking those buildings and rebuilding the town across the river on the other side, it takes you out of the forceful part of the river. By removing these buildings, that allows us to have a place to put the four-lane, Route 460. In the past, Grundy was a bottleneck. They couldn't get through Grundy. The cost of bypassing Grundy was more than what this whole project is. So, they build the levy in the bend of the river. They build it up to probably four to five feet about the second floors of where we are sitting now. On top of that levy, they put the four-lane. The remaining area behind the levy will be backfilled also. That gives Grundy a chance to redevelop that area. That used to be an area that was flooded all the time. So, by putting the road there, it also gives us redevelopment area to redevelop on. It protects our courthouse. It protects the buildings on the Walnut Street area, which is also where our jail is there. It creates a park atmosphere in front of the courthouse. It creates parking that we never had. By being located in the mountain area, parking is a big problem for us. It puts the town on the other side, but yet it still joins the courthouse area. You still see each other. You take the river that is usually mighty and forceful. You make it into a part of the community that is no longer feared, but makes it a scenic river in the heart of the town, which a river is our heritage, too. Our courthouse is our heritage. This area is protected, and we also have a new area. So, we saved the old and also build a new. We saved the history of our river and saved her beauty. So, it's just a wonderful project. There are not any negatives to it that I can find. There are concerns about it. But those concerns, you solve and you handle them one at a time. If you looked to this project as a whole from start to finish, there's a thousand things to be done. But the way you accomplish all these as you take it one at a time, one day at a time, and one problem at a time and you solve them and you overcome them. But as far as the future of our home and our county and our heritage, we preserved it all. We preserved our courthouse, our river, the people here. We take a project that gives our children hope. We have places for new businesses. Now, as it stands, the buildings here in this road are old, the fall of asbestos, the fall of lead paint. They still have flood mud in them. The wiring is gone. The roofs are gone. Those buildings, we can't put new businesses in. We have no place to put new businesses. This just gives us an opportunity of hope, glamor, and light. I guess you could put it as Grundy is always mining coal. We've always been in the middle of the (coal seam somewhere?). With this project, we've been able to have a few jewels pop up around it as the Appalachian School of Law. The new hotel is coming to town to comfort in. We have a new community center. We have a wonderful team center for our kids. With this project, I think with all the mining we've done, it's coming to an end. But with this project, we've actually found the diamond in the center of the card of the coal. The glamor of that diamond is just now getting ready to shine. It's going to shine and make Grundy a future. We, as the people of Grundy, have to thank the corps of engineers, the State of Virginia, and Virginia Department of Transportation for making it happen and caring about a community that has a chance of hope and life again. That's where it should be and I think should be is to those people.

MK: Thank you very much.

CC: You're welcome.

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