

Michael Nobel Kline: Okay. I'm going to tum this down and hold the mike a little closer to your mouth... Could you start out by saying, "My name" – I'll hold it.

Sue Branham: Oh.

MNK: "My name is."

SB: My name is Sue Branham.

MNK: Okay. Tell me your date of birth.

(006)

SB: July 18, 1937.

MNK: I never ask anybody's age.

SB: Oh, okay.

MNK: It's interesting, you know, to place people...

SB: Right, uh huh. Right.

MNK: And you are the owner?

SB: I'm the owner of The Corner in downtown Grundy, Virginia.

MNK: And your business here?

(010)

SB: My business is a ladies' and children's ready-to-wear.

MNK: And you have been here since?

SB: We purchased an existing business in March of 1977. March 4, exactly, of 1977. And then the 1977 flood roared through here April 4 of 1977, one month to the day.

MNK: Wow. Let's back up just a little bit.

SB: Okay.

MNK: ...

SB: Right. But this had been an existing business, you know, like for twenty- five years had not been flooded on this level at that time.

(017)

MNK: And you came here from?

SB: Well, I was living here. I was a--I have been a schoolteacher here for several years. And my sister-in-law and I decided we wanted a business. And this lady was wanting to retire and was selling this business. Actually my sister-in-law talked me into buying, you know, in with this. And--

MNK: So you got out of the teaching business?

(021)

SB: No, I taught school until 1991. I did both until '91.

MNK: And you taught?

SB: And I retired. At the junior high school, Grundy Junior High School, which was the building that you can see from my front door here.

MNK: ...

SB: Um hmm.

MNK: Okay.

SB: The building that is now the law school.

MNK: Oh, okay.

(025)

SB: Yeah, see. I taught--Well, actually I could go in 210 and see how the store was doing.

MNK: Um hmm. And you lived where at the time?

SB: I live up Slate Creek on Route 83, out of the floodplain.

MNK: So tell me about that, was it April 3, it had been raining a lot that week?

(029)

SB: Oh, yes, it was raining, and raining, and raining. And I was at home. They called school off. And my sister-in-law was down here with the business that day. And I could not get here once the water started rising. The mayor of the town was Barbara Berry at that time. And she actually picked this up, you know, that we were going to have this, you know, flash rising of the water, I guess. More of a flash flood. Had been picked up on some sort of wire service that they had through here. And she had been calling the merchants. So we had been in contact by phone, but we couldn't get here. The water was coming up so fast we couldn't even get down here on that morning. And it came through here about 2:30 that afternoon. Did you need to see me? Can you...

(038)

MNK: Yes.

SB: Did you need--Let me check you out. We're just doing--We're--

(tape turned off)

MNK: You were telling me that it had been raining an awful lot in the days before.

(041)

SB: It had been raining--! cannot remember how many days it had been raining, but it was really raining hard like the day before. You know, like on the third and then that night. And then on the fourth. And they had called off school that day. And that's why that we were all, you know, at different locations rather than being in town, which was really smart that they didn't have us all over here at this school with all the kids on the road.

MNK: And how did the morning progress then?

(046)

SB: Well, the water kept raising, and of course I was in contact with my sister- in-law, who was down here. And she finally left the store. She thought she was fixing everything, you know. She--And she had two ladies working with her at the time. And you see how it's laid out here. She put everything off the middle of the floor, you know, into the side walls. And they left here about-- She probably left here about one o'clock that day. And I think the water came through about 2:30. She didn't leave any too far in advance, really.

MNK: Why did she leave then? (052)

SB: Because the water was up in the street then out here. In fact, you know, when she left it was already on the street out here, you know. And they knew it was going to, or figured it was going to raise some more. So they left and just closed it up. So the water, I think, came through town here about 2:30. Now that's been awhile, but that's what I remember it being. And the only communications we had--By then we had--You know, the power was off. The radio station was out. We listened to--Elkhorn City Radio stayed on the air, and they kept us updated, you know, as to what was happening as much as they could.

(060)

And so I think the water came through here about 2:30. I always felt like if it had come at night there would have been a lot of lives lost. Because people just did not think it was going to come that--It was so swift. That's the thing about our water. Because we have such a drop in elevation from these mountains, you know. And everything comes into these channels, and it's so much swifter. You know, when you see, you know, like--When I see floods on TV that they're picturing it, lots of time it's seeping up and they know it's coming, you know. It just all comes at once here, and it is so swift.

MNK: So being right at the corner here you're actually at the mouth of the--

(069)

SB: I described it the intersection of Slate Creek and Levisa River. That's where we are. That's what I told the SBA. And that's where we are. Because what happened was, as far as where we're located here, some wood from a bridge, a big--I don't know, I guess--What would you call it a span of wood, came through this front door, you know, burst through the door. And the pressure then burst out a window in the back. And it just siphoned merchandise out the window. That's how swift it was. There was nothing left in this whole center here, you know, except just some fallen, you know, clothes, and racks, and so forth. But it just--It took the merchandise out the back window because of the force of the water. It's hard to imagine. I can, you know--I'm glad I wasn't in here. But it did that.

(079)

MNK: So the next day then you--

SB: We had to come down the next day, uh huh. And we could only come as far as Mountain Mission School and park. That's as far as anyone could drive in. And so you just--

MNK: Why was that?

(082)

SB: The roads were so encumbered with debris and so tom up that they didn't let traffic come any farther. They had emergency vehicles only, you know, coming through. Because they just actually basically closed all the town, you know, downtown section. And so we parked and carried shovels and all that, and walked in.

MNK: What did you see?

(087)

SB: Just complete devastation of this, I mean inside. We had mud like up to three feet deep in here. We had, not mulch, bags of potting soil that had washed from Food City over here. And you know how heavy potting soil is. We had bags of potting soil in here. That's how swift that water was.

MNK: So it carried it how far...

(092)

SB: Would you say that's 300 yards? Probably 300 yards, I would say. We had a snake. We shoveled for about three days, shoveled mud. It was so heavy and so, you know, wet, and heavy, and deep. And we had to shovel it out. And we found a snake in here. But it was just devastation. Like the clothes my sister-in-law had hung on the walls, the water, which was pure mud, hit it

right here at the shoulder line. So every piece of merchandise was ruined. There was nothing that wasn't ruined that was in here.

(100)

MNK: And what did the main street look like?

SB: It just--Debris piled and mud. They brought high-lifts and, you know, had to lift, you know, and haul it off in trucks. Just twisted metal, and trash, and trees, and mud.

MNK: Now there are merchants on downstream from you here, and there are merchants across Slate Creek—

SB: Right.

MNK: --on--What do you call that, Main Street?

SB: Main Street, um hmm. Main Street.

MNK: How did the merchants generally fare?

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SB: Well, everyone was in the same situation we were. I mean, you know, everything was pretty much washed out there. Now there was some people on this lower end of town didn't get it in their main level of their businesses. You know, like down toward what is now Streets Law Firm, used to be some businesses down in there. And they did not get it into their main levels of operation like we did. And--But like the Family Shop down there had, you know, like two--Well, Jackson Hardware too between us here. A lot of the businesses had lower levels of merchandise that we didn't have. We just had our level on Main Street, and they had like a second floor under, you know, that also was flooded. We had a basement down there. Had our furnace. We had an oil furnace, and water heater, and switch box, and all that that it took out. But not merchandise.

(120)

But most every business was flooded. All the ones up at the upper end of town were and all the way down to--Like I said, there was some now where his office is down there now. Maybe down where the, where you see that last Dollar Store. That was not flooded in there. But everyone was just in the same predicament. And of course we had no power and no water here in town neither, because all those lines had been destroyed. So it was worse trying to do cleanup. You know, you were just sort of manpower only... what you could work during daylight hours.

MNK: So how did you begin?

(128)

SB: We all came--The whole family came, you know, everybody came. And we just started shoveling, and cleaning, and, you know, picking it up, and putting what had to be hauled away

out on the street. And then they would come by with these things and haul it away, you know, with the big trucks, the emergency vehicles, and haul anything you put out away. And just a slow process. And then after all that, when they did restore some town water, we, I remember we had the--Well, no, I don't guess it was the restoration of the town water, the fire trucks—I know we had the fire hose in here one day, fire truck with water, and hosed out the mud that couldn't be, you know, the last part of it that couldn't be shoveled. It's unreal, I mean to think back about it. And I think that we only were so strong because we were so young! I don't know if I could do that again or not, you know.

MNK: It was unreal to think about the energy that you had to put out?

(142)

SB: Yes, right. The work that was ahead and the devastation. And not really being just like, "I can't do this," you know. We weren't like that. Nobody in town, I don't think, was like that. We all just worked. Everybody helped everybody.

MNK: Where did people eat or how did they cook? Was there a food kitchen set up?

(147)

SB: We brought what we ate from home, you know. When we would come down, we would just, you know, pack whatever we had, you know, and bring it down with us from home. But they did set up emergency shelter over at the junior high school, what's now the law school, and served food. A lot of people stayed over there that were out of homes. You know, they just set up an emergency shelter over there. My husband at the time was principal of the junior high school over there. And they just set that whole place up as an emergency shelter.

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MNK: So they had--

SB: They could have--

MNK: --drinking water?

(155)

SB: Oh, yeah. Had to haul all your water, yeah, all the drinking water and everything. Of course now we carried water from home. Thank goodness our home wasn't flooded. So, you know, we had water. But I was trying to think. I can't remember. We went and ate with different people. I mean whoever was cooking you'd go eat with because you were so tired you didn't cook... when you got home. Of course we had no power either. We had no power for three days and nights at our house, which is like approximately four miles from here up Slate Creek. It was not in the floodplain. So you didn't do any cooking, you know.

MNK: So you were up on the bank a little bit?

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SB: No, we were right, really by the highway. But I guess we were far enough removed from the creek bed our side of the road was not--You know, we were across the road from the creek. Like the homes across the road from us were flooded, but ours was not. Because it came up in the road and blocked the roadway. But we just didn't have it in our home, which really helped.

MNK: And what was the impact of the flood on children? You were teaching school.

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SB: I was teaching school, um hmm. I was teaching at the junior high school. Well, we didn't have school. I was trying to think how long we were out of school. We ended up that year missing a total of thirty days. The State allowed the school system here to cut the year short thirty days that year. Our school year was 150 instead of 180 days. So by the time that we got back into school, the children were back into, you know, homes or in some sort of decent living situation by that time.

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So as far as the impact on them I guess I didn't think it hurt them that much. I mean it didn't seem to. I'm sure that it's in their memory, I mean, you know, of their experiences. We had one son that was at home with us at the time that was--I was trying--How old he was. We had two girls in college at the time at VPI. They were in Blacksburg when this happened. And my son was--I was trying to think what grade he was in. He was about in the--'77. Ninth grade, I guess. Or eighth grade. Eighth grade. He was in eighth grade. So he just stayed with us everyday. He came and worked with us everyday. And he was just a real trooper through all that.

MNK: So you had to remodel this store then...

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SB: Yes. We--That was another major problem, was getting workers, and getting supplies, you know, to reopen a business. And getting merchandise again. We were out--We were closed completely for six weeks, you know, with--I mean not--You know, never opening the door for six weeks. But we had to get a crew. I think our crew came from....And they ended up raising our floor. The floor was the level that it is when you enter the door. We have two steps over there where they raised it, because they convinced us that to get back in business, which was true I'm sure, that we would be back in quicker just to lay a new floor higher up rather than tear out the old flooring, because we had a wooden flooring. And so they got us back in in about six weeks, which was pretty good.

MNK: What did that cost, roughly? I mean that must have just—

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SB: You know, I've thought of that. Someone else asked me that question. It's hard to estimate what it cost. It really set us back years when you think about it investment wise, because for one

thing, any day that you close your flow of business, you know, you have a problem. But we had just purchased the building, and the existing merchandise, and goodwill of the store. You know, we just purchased the business, existing business and the building. And we had no insurance on it other than basic, you know, insurance. I think we collected \$8,500 from the insurance. As far as reopening the business, basic repairs to the building is all they covered, or that was the part that they covered. So we ended up getting a loan from the SBA. So we started out with two debts, you know, buying the business and a big loan from the SBA. And so I think it's hard

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to estimate what that does to your business, because also you start out--You're out of business completely for six weeks, which is a good part of the year. And you're out of merchandise, which you have to start completely new stocking merchandise. And that takes a while to get it in, you know. We were probably operational again by, I mean really to be stocked and, you know, having customers. Of course you didn't have a lot of customers either because everybody was recovering, or a big portion of the population was recovering from the flood. And they weren't out enjoying shopping and things that normal, are normal activities for a community.

MNK: A lot of them were out of pocket money when they did recover.

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SB: Right, yes, right. They were replacing basic items for their homes or making payments back to the government for loaning them that easy money. But they make it sound so easy. But now they set up emergency, you know, facilities at this Temple Motel up here too. And that's where they processed applications for SBA loans, and emergency help, and everything like this. They had a lot of agencies up there at the--I'm sure you've seen that large building. That's the Temple Motel. That's where we had to go to get any help.

MNK: One-stop shopping, so to speak?

SB: One-stop shopping, right.

MNK: Was FEMA there then?

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SB: No, I don't think so. I don't think they were in existence.

MNK: What--Was there any federal emergency aid of any kind?

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SB: Well, the SBA loans. That's what they offered the merchants, you know. But the Red Cross was in helping people that were out of homes. That's the only ones I recall. But I didn't deal with them since our home wasn't, you know, involved. So there might have been more help. A lot of people came in and volunteered help from outside the community. The Mennonites, I know, sent groups in that helps people. So they may have been under some federal program, but it may just

have been under some charity organization, I'm not real sure. But they did come (telephone ringing) through and help those in their homes, is what they basically did, to clean and repair. (telephone ringing)

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MNK: Whole family, huh?

SB: Um hmm.

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MNK: Well, I don't see how you could--Well, I guess with a SBA loan maybe, but then take on a whole other note. How did you have the courage to--

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SB: Well, actually you didn't--We probably didn't have any choice, you know, when you think about it. Because we had just taken on the purchase of the store, and the only way that we saw any way out was to work our way out of it. So that's what we've tried to do.

MNK: So now there's a plan that will deliver Grundy from the floods it seems. People are talking about--

SB: True.

MNK: What's been--How has that plan developed over time...

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SB: Well, when they first started talking about it, I probably thought that it wouldn't happen in my lifetime. Because that's the way most projects like that go. And now it seems that--I think they are going to get it off the ground, you know, but I don't know how many years it's going to be in coming. I hope they'll rush it up, because I'm getting old! But I think it will be a good solution to the problem. I think it's the only solution to the problem. Several—I know one day a customer said to me--I don't know if you want this. But, you -know, she said, "You'll be too old by the time they relocate the town. You won't relocate." And my husband said I should have looked at her and said, "Well, one more flood and I'm not going to be here anyway," you know. You can't start over but so many times. So I really feel like it's the hope for the future, is to relocate the town. And I think if those of us who are getting older aren't there, younger people will be. Because I think. if you relocate this and have a nice district for people, that people will shop here.

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MNK: So some buildings will be raised and some buildings will be razed--

SB: Right.

MNK: --depending on how you spell it.

SB: Right, uh huh.

MNK: Now which will be the fate of this building?

SB: Oh, it's going to be razed. •

MNK: Meaning?

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SB: Meaning we're right at the intersection of the new roadway. The road will come right through this building. Right.

MNK: Are you okay about that?

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SB: I feel okay about that, uh huh. I don't have sentimental attachments to objects, you know. My attachments are to people. And I think that new location--The way they projected it, it will be an affordable relocation, is what I see. I mean this is--You know, we're not going to be like-- It's not going to be like if you went to Bristol where a developer was, you know, developing a mall and paid these high, high rents. This is supposed to be an affordable square footage that people can relocate in.

MNK: How's that going—

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SB: It's the way that the town is handling it according to· Chuck, you know, our town manager. It's--I would quote how much he says a square foot we're supposed to be able to either lease, or buy, or, you know, whichever you decide to do in the new buildings. They haven't decided, I don't think, whether they're going to allow, whether they're going to sell them or whether they're going to lease them, or the town's going to do the building, you know, and then lease the spaces, or whether they're going to allow individuals to buy spaces. They haven't quite decided all of that. But they do think it will be more affordable than real estate normally is, because we'd be in a rebuilding project, and the way they're setting it up.

MNK: If it came by the year 2005, would you be willing to, or ready to make the jump yourself?

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SB: Probably not me personally, but perhaps my family would, you know. I have a daughter that, a CPA that works upstairs, and they plan to stay here. So it may be that we would continue the business but just not me actively doing it, because if it's 2005--Well, I might be okay to do it. It sort of depends! We actually have talked that it would be, I think, good business to go ahead and relocate and set up, and then as you, if you decide you're too old to run it yourself, to sell it at

that point. To sell an existing business should be better for us financially than closing an existing business. Does it not sound--

MNK: ... in a new location.

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SB: Right. So that's what my husband and I had discussed, that, yes, we would reopen, and set it up, and get it going. And then if we decide there's no one within the family that wants to run it and operate it, then sell it as an existing business. It would be better financially for us. Does that not make sense?

(328)

MNK: It does.

SB: Um hmm.

MNK: You're a good business person.

SB: Oh, well, thanks. I don't know.

MNK: What is the prevailing notion about this new design among the merchants?

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SB: I think the merchants are for it. And I think a lot of them are just hesitant to say anything. I've had several people come up to me and say, "Well, you know, I really hope you keep talking for this plan, because I like it." And perhaps they should just poll the merchants instead of asking the public at large that aren't involved. The ones that are not personally involved seem to speak louder than those of us who are personally involved. And I said, "Well, you need to come to these meetings and speak up." "Well, I don't really want to be in the limelight on that, but you just go ahead and keep talking about it." So I really feel like, that the merchants--If--I mean the ones I can just think of personally that I've been here with all these years, I don't know, I think most of them are definitely for it.

MNK: But the merchants don't, aren't necessarily the ones who own these old buildings.

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SB: Well, most of them do right now that are left. See, we've got a lot of these old buildings that are empty up here that the Morgan family owns. But they keep the rent so high and the condition of the buildings so low that no one can make it, you know, they've tried. That's Lorraine, she's okay But actually the existing businesses--Now, Rich's up there rent from the Morgans, and he's got a good business. But he's also got businesses in other locations. But he tells me that he will relocate in the new area, that he's all for that. The one who has the nice shoe store up the street. He's a very nice man. But he has a store in Richlands,

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and a store at the Anchor Shopping Center above town at. ... And so I feel like he'll stay in business. He's the only major one up the street that rents. Now this new Books and Things, I don't know how they'll do. They rent from the Morgans. But that's a new owner. A young couple just bought that, which, you know, even with all this project being talked, they went ahead and bought that existing business. And they rent. Now we own. Jacksons owns. All these down this side of the street are in their own buildings, other than the Dollar Store down there. And they rent.

MNK: And as far as you know they're all willing and ready to relocate?

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SB: As far as I know, they are. There used to be a lot more businesses here. But--

MNK: What do you think that the impact of the center would be on that? Do you think some would come back...

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SB: I think new businesses would come in. And I don't know that some of those that have been here and closed down would come back. But I think that if you have a good business district like that, that you will have people adventurous enough to invest and go into business. It's always the American dream to have your own business.

MNK: Are there other places, like other sort of new towns like this that a person could go and look at? Or is this--

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SB: I think the best model that I know personally is Pikeville, Kentucky. Are you familiar with Pikeville? Now Pikeville--When I was--I went to college at Pikeville College, and when I was down there in the '60s the mayor of the town had this idea. See, they flooded so badly also in their business district, and all their homes, and everything. And all these many times that we've had any flood, they usually had bigger. And he had this dream to put the river through the mountain. And he got federal assistance, and people thought he was crazy in the '60s.

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It's a boom town now. They did it. He first started with getting the town an All-American City and getting some federal money in there and some attention in there. And then they drew up this project to put the river through the mountain, did a cut through. They moved the river, and it's wonderful. The downtown doesn't exist like it did. It has gone to like businesses—I mean not businesses, offices and this type thing. But the new areas they built is where all the business is. They built strip malls. They don't have an enclosed mall, but they have about three different shopping areas like we've talked about. Only they're probably on a bigger scale than we'll be, because it's a bigger community. And it's--Business is wonderful down there.

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And people go wherever the good shops are to buy. And the downtown area didn't revitalize. I mean even though they moved the river away from the town, those buildings were old anyway, you know. And they have become more, like I say, there's some businesses in there. They got some antique shops and some things like this, but it's mostly become office buildings.

MNK: Attorneys and—

(415)

SB: Um hmm. Attorneys near the courthouse, which is always, you know, good. I mean it's good that they've become that, you know. But the people are shopping in all the new areas. And the old stores have stayed there. I mean they're all there. And so I feel like that our people will too. And then more have gone in. And they've got a Wal-Mart. They got a K-Mart. Doesn't seem to have hurt the small people. There are still small stores existing down there.

MNK: So will the new Grundy feature a strip mall, or a closed mall, or--

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SB: They haven't quite decided. I think it's going to be a combination of the two. I think part of it will be accessible as like a strip to pull in, you know, near, and some will be enclosed. They aren't sure yet. I mean it's just still, I think, on the board on that. But I think the new, the Food City is going to relocate, which I think would be good to have that as an anchor store, you know, because, you know, anybody who goes to buy groceries, if there's other stores around--Terry Trivett and I were talking about it this morning, about how, you know, if we all get in a cluster it helps everybody's business. I mean, you know, here we have this little strip down here that people, you know, shop together, you know.

MNK:

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SB: On this side, this street on 460. And I think it would be so nice if we had a good parking area where more people could park, and just run in, and, you know, go in Jackson's, come in here, go to the Family Shop. We think that side-by-side businesses feed off each other, definitely.

MNK: Especially if you got a 600-car garage.

(445)

SB: Right. Um hmm. Instead of a place for two cars. Yeah.

MNK: What do you think about the argument that it's just not going to flood here anymore?

(450)

SB: Oh, I think that's a real fallacy that few people really believe. It will flood here again. Yeah. We've even had some people say, "Well, the water table is low." No, that makes no difference. It's our terrain. I mean if we have the rain, we're going to flood. Definitely. Just like I say here, we're at the intersection of Slate Creek and Levisa River. We're going to flood again. It's just a matter of when. We've had several high waters that seemed threatening since '77 that we used to, you know, evacuate. But we just decided, you know, we got tired of that, you know. Carry everything upstairs. You have to take it down the street and up the steps. We do have some storage up there. Damaged a lot of things that way, so we decided to sit through it. But we will flood again if we stay here long enough.

MNK: And even if you don't flood, what's happening to the coal reserves here? How much more-
-How many more years is... active coal industry?

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SB: I think there's lots of years of coal left here. I think it might be different types of mining techniques that recover it, but I don't think the coal is gone here. I mean I don't think the coal industry is dead. Looks a little bad right now, twenty percent unemployment I heard on TV last night.

MNK: Twenty percent.

(475)

SB: Twenty percent in Buchanan County right now. But it's a lot of shifting of ownership of these mines and things. See A.T. Massey just came in and bought United Coal, and they laid a lot of people off. They're redirecting their personnel. I mean, you know, they're switching around to, I guess see who's going to work and who's not. So I think that's maybe not a true unemployment picture right now. I think that will reverse. But I do think there's some coal reserve left here. I think that's why A.T. Massey's coming in here. And United got tired of the coal business. They've moved on to other things. They raise tomatoes. They're the second largest tomato producer in the United States, I think, something way up there. Right. And they're into golf courses, other things.

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MNK: Any parting thoughts?

SB: No, I just hope they get this done in time for me to enjoy it!

MNK: Thank you very much.

SB: Uh huh.