

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Joan and Darrell Heckler Oral History
Date of Interview: April 14, 1986
Location: Tucker County, West Virginia
Length of Interview: 01:21:56
Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Kline: You probably don't even know what day of the week it is, do you?

Darrell Heckler: It's Monday. I have no work.

MK: Where do you work?

DH: Firefox [inaudible].

MK: How long have you been up there?

DH: Probably about twelve years.

MK: Twelve years. Can you tell me your full name?

DH: Darrell Lynn Heckler.

MK: You were raised here in Tucker County.

DH: [affirmative]

MK: Where?

DH: [inaudible] and Parsons mostly.

MK: Tell me a little bit about your people.

DH: I don't know. I don't know about it.

MK: Who's your dad?

DH: Durl Heckler, Dub Heckler, they call him. My mother is Beulah Heckler.

MK: Who is she?

DH: Poling.

MK: She's a Poling. Where did your dad go?

DH: In Parsons. My mother lived in Parsons too. I've got four brothers and one sister.

MK: Pretty good-sized family. They all stay around here?

DH: [affirmative] In the area.

MK: All of them?

JH: (Randall?)

DH: Oh, (Randall?). He [inaudible] around.

MK: That's unusual. You might find a few but [inaudible] them all. You've lived up here for how long?

DH: About four years.

MK: But mostly around the St. George area here.

DH: Yes. Been in St. George for about ten years.

JH: Thirteen.

DH: Thirteen years.

MK: What do you remember about November 4th?

DH: It's a lot of water. [laughter]

MK: How long had it been raining?

DH: Four to five days of rain.

MK: When did you notice that it was getting bad?

DH: About 9:00 p.m.

JH: It was the neighbor who called us down.

DH: The neighbors called us down to get on the basement, help in the basement. [inaudible]

MK: Down in St. George?

DH: [affirmative]

MK: So, tell me about it. What happened?

DH: The basement started getting water and we started pumping it out. We see the losing battle when suddenly the water quickly started coming on us. [inaudible] came down. We got out on the floor and everything started [inaudible] the house. The basement [inaudible] we got out there. Then what we did we do?

JH: We moved everything out.

DH: We moved everything out of the basement in front of the garage.

JH: Then we moved everything out of the garage and put them on the front porch. [laughter]

MK: This was [inaudible] the neighbors.

DH: Yes. [inaudible] in the store.

JH: Yes. It was (Harry Parson?).

DH: We were helping them until about, what 9:00, 10:00, 11:00. Then we came back up here. We went over to the grocery store across the river and see if they need any help. They were up in the stairs and water is up about waist deep down there. So, we moved the food down there in a boat.

JH: I tried to get down to communities and they wouldn't. They didn't think the water was going to get that high. So, they stayed. We told them we'll call about 10:00 p.m.

MK: This was who now?

JH: Bob and (Rita?) Jones. When we tried to call them, the phones were out. So, we're going down to check on them. Something is going on. So, back to St. George we went again. That's when we saw the water was coming up. I mean it was coming up so fast. It was unbelievable. Someone said that (Lillian Town?) was still in their house.

DH: Danny –

JH: Johnson?

DH: Yes. Danny Johnson. He said he's still around the house.

MK: So, what did you do when you heard they're still in their house?

DH: [inaudible] over because the water is too deep to go across.

MK: How did you start to go?

DH: Swim, walk through it.

MK: Is there any way you could [inaudible]?

DH: Everything you see that's out of the house was taken out. So, we thought that was too deep. [laughter] So, we took off and come back up here. I got (Jeraimus?) He had a boat up here and along the plumps. They plumped long too, so we took the boat and come back down. [inaudible] got in the boat and took off and went up.

MK: Can you give me a little more detail about that night? I mean, what kind of a boat was it?

DH: Just a boat and we had two brooms we used for row is what we have, paddles.

MK: Two brooms.

DH: Yes. We used for paddles, two brooms. So, we went up and tried to walk in the water to [inaudible] back down. So, back up front and tried again and [inaudible] down again. This time, we're [inaudible] St. George, walked up this side and tried it again and [inaudible]. So, then we made it that time over the house. Then we tried again going upstairs [inaudible] down the river flow straight at us. I yelled, "Get us out and help." He yelled, "No." So, I kicked the window out on top of the house. I wanted to [inaudible] stayed out in the boat, and meanwhile I brought the broom. So, we finally got them out of the house and into the boat. She didn't want to go because the dog was there and she couldn't find the dog. It was up in the attic and she wouldn't leave the dog. So, I went up to the top of the attic and kicked a couple cabinets apart and take the [inaudible] off him and [inaudible] come back. That's all the work to it. [laughter]

MK: What did the trailer do?

DH: Hit the house. [inaudible] I was inside and Joe with us.

JH: He had just said that he was hanging on to the side of the house. He said whenever the trailer hit, his arm went clearing the house like that.

DH: He split the corner of it off.

JH: It's ripped and torn apart.

DH: When we got in the mountain, [inaudible] George there. The house is [inaudible] and no one's starting down the river. He went down and [inaudible] George and got wedged and stopped.

MK: So, while you were still on the boat coming back with them, their house begins to float?

DH: [affirmative]

JH: They were nuts, weren't they? [laughter]

DH: There's been worst to it. [laughter]

MK: There must have been more to it than that. Were you scared?

DH: No. I wasn't scared.

JH: I was. I was petrified because there were electric poles falling. Our house that we used down in St. George, it come out. I mean, it just disintegrated right in front of our eyes. In five

minutes time, it was gone. I was petrified.

MK: You didn't care?

DH: [laughter] She does that to me. That's why I go back [inaudible] the boat does. That's all. He just wants [inaudible] at the boat. So, [inaudible]. We didn't do it the way I see it.

MK: What did the force of the water feel like against that little boat?

DH: It was [inaudible] swift really. [inaudible]

MK: You went out in the main part of the river? Strike at anything.

DH: Yes.

MK: Where did you get the brooms?

DH: I think it's come off [inaudible], didn't we?

JH: Yes.

DH: [inaudible]. She has [inaudible] going through the same brooms. [laughter] Those are her brooms. She rigged and [inaudible]. [laughter]

MK: You kept the brooms when you took the boat.

DH: Yes. We were down at the basement to find something to paddle with. We found two brooms she had.

MK: It never would have occurred to me.

DH: Maybe Joe thought about it. Joe does a lot of boating.

MK: Always takes a broom whenever he goes out probably.

DH: No, he usually has paddles and a motorboat too.

MK: That's the most bag on courageous thing I ever heard of. I can't imagine. How far from where you launched the boat was it actually out to the house?

DH: You know, St. George, don't you?

MK: Yes.

DH: Well, that's when it goes down and past post office. About half an hour or so, I don't know.

MK: What did you use for a light?

DH: I had an old beam light, something like that.

MK: That's all you had. Was it a real dark night?

DH: Yes, it was dark and raining.

MK: How could you see?

DH: You can see on an [inaudible]. You close that if you see stuff. The top of the houses [inaudible] taking the boat [inaudible] going.

MK: You could recognize the houses by their tops because you could tell where you were?

DH: Some of them I could. A couple of town [inaudible] were there.

JH: No one [inaudible] sets for you. That's when you saw the light at [inaudible] and down this house too.

DH: Yes, we got trapped there. Because they've got [inaudible] in this house. Then we got [inaudible] and we can't get out. So, I got on top of the house [inaudible] and got back in. We started to comeback because we dominated line to continue [inaudible]. Now, she's right up in the attic. My house calls for the [inaudible], please come to the room. So, we tried their [inaudible] shut down by the [inaudible] water took down the house.

MK: Did you have this fancy talking to get them to crawl out into that boat?

DH: [inaudible] second. [laughter]

JH: He tried once before and tried to get him to go with this because the water was coming up in the downstairs part then. And we tried to get them to leave. They said, "No. The water is not going to get that high. We'll just go upstairs and we'll be fine." So, we went ahead and left. Then when we went back down, we saw the water wasn't that fine.

DH: I went over and come to the window. I said, "You want to go out now or you want to wait an hour longer?" He said, "I want to go right now."

MK: What about her?

DH: Oh, she's hunting for the dog. She wouldn't go without that dog. We had even tried giving [inaudible]. So, that's when I went inside. She's up in the attic. I just go, "[inaudible] if I had to get her out." Finally, she did go with the dog.

MK: Then it comes back [inaudible].

DH: That's about it. I went down and got the other woman out.

JH: Marry Hab didn't got out too.

MK: Marry Hab, I didn't hear about her. Tell me about her.

DH: She [inaudible] we're there. The water was up to her waist and she wouldn't come out. So, I just come down her door and made her come.

JH: She broke that door. Because we screamed at her and tried to get her attention.

MK: How old is she?

DH: About sixty-five years, sixty, I don't know.

MK: You didn't ask if she want to come? You just went in and got her?

DH: I told her. We also asked if [inaudible] get in there. What the hell.

JH: Well, she was afraid of the water was one thing. She didn't want to get in the water.

DH: There were some other guys with me.

JH: No, it's just you and a couple of boys that got Mary.

DH: [inaudible] with me. There was even a boy about twenty years old.

JH: Well, that might have been (Connie Jones?).

DH: I don't know who it was who went to follow with me. He said she wouldn't come out.

MK: So, you don't think of this at all as an act of heroism or anything.

DH: I think we had a boat and I offered for them.

MK: What do you think about it?

JH: I'm proud of him.

DH: Thank you.

MK: Is that the kind of what he always does?

JH: He does. It's just the kind of a guy he is. [laughter]

MK: He doesn't wait around.

JH: He doesn't think. I'm the one [inaudible] and thinks [laughter] and worries. But he's like that. He's someone [inaudible]. He's always been like that.

MK: That's a great story. But you were involved earlier in the rescue of the police officers.

JH: Oh, yes.

MK: You forgot about that. You forgot you were a hero too. Hang on. Your full name?

JH: Joan Ellen Heckler.

MK: Joan.

JH: Ellen Heckler.

MK: Ellen?

JH: Ellen.

MK: Ellen. What's your maiden name?

JH: Wiles.

MK: Wiles. Where were you raised?

JH: Right here in the south.

MK: [inaudible]

JH: [affirmative]

MK: Nice.

JH: Yes. [laughter]

MK: You're making some big changes here.

JH: Oh, yes. It had to be. I mean, the house was a mess.

MK: Did your dad build this house?

JH: [affirmative]

MK: What would he think about these changes?

JH: He lives with us.

MK: Oh, he does.

JH: Yes. My mom died about four years ago.

MK: He approves?

JH: He didn't at first. Now, he does. [laughter]

DH: Well, you do [inaudible]. [laughter]

MK: We just came from talking to the sheriff and the trooper about their little adventure in the [inaudible] charges. Can you tell us what you remember about that? That all happened before this.

JH: Yes. We see the water started over the road. Because Darrell and I just come back from checking on Bob and Dodd. Well, (Gary Lipscomb?) and – I can't think of the state trooper's name.

MK: (Keith Cordial?).

JH: Yes, Cordial. They started back through it. Darrell thought he was going to lose his truck because he started to come back across. When they got about halfway into the water, their truck, I mean, it just went sideways. What stopped though – and they had this rope and they threw it at us. Trina and Steve and I and (Connie Jones?) grabbed the rope. They got across that some way but then the cruiser went on down the river.

MK: But where did they throw the rope from? Were they inside of it?

JH: No. They were on top of it.

MK: Tell me the whole story.

JH: They had just crawled out of the vehicle and got on top and started hollering help. It's funny now, it wasn't then. But to look at it now, it's funny. But we just took off running. I mean, Trina and I and Steve, we were standing there on the other side of the road. We just took off running over on the back. When they threw the rope, we grabbed it. Then we tied it off on a fence post which is washed away by now, but we just pulled them. I mean, all four of us grabbed to hold the rope and they come across it. That was about it.

MK: Did you wrap the rope around yourself?

JH: I don't even remember. I don't know. I was on the tail end of it, so I may have. [laughter]

DH: Are you sure you did? [laughter]

JH: I could have. I really don't remember. [laughter] I mean, there was a lot that went on that night that was brain boggling. No one expected it. I mean, it was something that no one expected. To see the water that high and to take that old bridge out, there was plenty of water.

MK: There hadn't been any warning in the forecast.?

JH: No. Darrell and I talked to Gary and another state trooper. They said that they hadn't even thought of St. George. I mean, they had had a 20-minute warning in Hendrix. But they said that St. George just didn't even cross their mind. It didn't. I mean, they had no warning whatsoever.

MK: It is hard to imagine.

JH: It is.

MK: St. George, you think of it as being well off and away from the river.

JH: Right.

MK: There it was up in the second storey, 4-feet up in the second storey of the town.

JH: Yes. Well, over there at Bob Jones was a 16-foot because there was a mark around the top of his ceiling how high the water was. I mean, to think about it now, you still can't imagine. I mean, you know what happened. I mean, you can see it all around you. But it still doesn't seem real.

MK: Have you had any dreams about what happened up there?

JH: Oh, I did.

MK: What did you dream about?

JH: I don't know, I ended up with an ulcer. [laughter]

MK: Really?

JH: I worked day and night you may as well say. I worked in St. George two weeks helping the people get the mud and stuff cleaned out. Darrell took a week off mark too and helped. Then they were fixing meals at the Parsons at the grade school up there. They were feeding over 1,000. So, the third week, I start up there now work three weeks up there. But I mean, it was something I couldn't imagine. Because I can remember the flood back in [19]54. It took (Center Cassidy's?) house. But this, I mean, it was nothing compared to this. I mean –

MK: What time was it when the trooper threw the rope?

JH: About 9:00.

MK: Because what the trooper told us and the sheriff told us same thing and about four weeks ago, a fireman told us the same thing. They said that a wall of water came down. The farmer told us the same thing in an unrelated incident. They were down there trying to save [inaudible].

JH: I left because we were trying to get them near, and Jay can't. See, they weren't out yet. Bill died right after the flood, not long after flood. But we went over and were trying to see if we could help them and get them out, get Bill out mainly because he was in a wheelchair. So, after we got to troopers over, I mean, we just went over there, or I did.

DH: [inaudible] was very high, it was. [inaudible] water got up to take on [inaudible].

JH: Well, I don't know how long it's set clear though.

DH: Well, they tuck behind us, they can cause it.

MK: They said like a wave of water hit them and knock them off.

DH: It may have then.

MK: You don't remember saying anything?

JH: No, I don't.

DH: That truck went sideways so we may have come across it.

JH: It was swift going across that.

DH: [inaudible] they may have come behind me.

MK: It was Steve and Trina or were they behind you?

JH: I think they were behind us, weren't they?

MK: Because they said they lost control of their truck too.

JH: Yes.

MK: So, you worked five weeks all together?

JH: Yes. Well, I cleaned for two weeks down here, then went up to the school and started cooking. But I would sleep two hours a night. I mean, it just seemed like I had more energy than I knew what to do with. I couldn't relax. I go to sleep. I get to think about those people that were homeless, in the mud. Boy, I know John saw the mud. I mean it was a mess. What all they lost and everything and it really got to me.

MK: Were you paid to work out at the school?

JH: Oh no. No.

MK: How many hours did you work a day?

JH: Oh, most usually I go in – I'd get the kids off where they started – have they started school back yet? They hadn't, had they? The last week they'd started back. So, it was probably about 7:30 a.m. when I go in. Normally, it'd be probably about 3:00 p.m. when I'd leave. But I got my pay. [laughter]

MK: What was that?

JH: Just I knew I was helping. I was doing something that the people needed. When I went up there, I mean, those cooks, (Peneway Bright?) and (Sarah Nest?), I mean, they were exhausted. Sarah had been there well, from the time the floods started. She's one of those in the school up and brought everyone up there. She was asking when I could get to school. So, when I went in, it was two weeks later, I went up and started helping. I mean, you could just see, they were literally exhausted. Then we all worked together and we made it.

MK: You think it has been a real spirit all over the county of people helping each other?

JH: I do. I really do. I mean, it has brought a lot of people together. I can remember when I was a kid. I mean, it used to be people help neighbors help neighbors. But you don't find that anymore. But when this flood happened, you did. I mean, everyone chipped in and helped and was able to. I'm glad it's over.

MK: Do you think that spirit will carry on now?

JH: I hope it does because I think people need it.

DH: It's going to take a long time.

JH: It is. Yes, it is.

MK: I think that's great. I think you're both heroes.

JH: I don't feel like a hero. I just did what I thought needed to be done.

MK: Well, that's what heroes always do.

JH: I don't know. I'm no hero. [laughter]

MK: You'd like to everybody –

JH: No, no.

MK: Joan, can you think of anything?

JH: [inaudible] you're doing. Because these are stories that need to be told, and they do. I mean, not just for me and Darrell, but everybody. I mean, you wouldn't believe the people that come into St. George and helped, come in to Parsons and helped. I mean, they were people from Weirton all over. I mean, they came in and they worked just to get things straightened up.

MK: Do you think it's important that these stories be told?

JH: I do.

MK: Why is that?

JH: Just to let people know that there are people around that care.

DH: [inaudible] Have you heard anything about that?

MK: The boat over there?

DH: Yes. Somebody could go on people out there –

MK: That was (Don Goss?).

DH: The (Don Goss?).

MK: They also got [inaudible] out of the river. Don took what seven people out of the attic window.

DH: I head they placed they placed [inaudible] after we did.

MK: Don is seventy years old.

DH: I heard he is. They played [inaudible] told me wouldn't go out there. [inaudible] he told me.

MK: Don is not afraid of anything, another hero.

DH: Another hero back home. [inaudible]

JH: I bet you're nuts. [laughter]

MK: [inaudible] power motors with two brooms.

DH: Yes. [laughter]

JH: Here they come back with two tuba (force?). [laughter]

MK: What in the world do you think were they after? You didn't see him or anything?

JH: You couldn't see nothing. No light, nothing. Trina and Steve were with me. I was nervous wreck.

DH: You have to talk [inaudible]. He can't swim.

JH: He can't. [laughter]

DH: [inaudible]

MK: You can swim?

DH: I mean, I've been out in the water all my life. [inaudible] the difference. I mean, [inaudible] other people would. To me, I couldn't hardly got hurt. But Joe, he can't swim. It makes a difference.

JH: He was there. But he didn't hesitate one minute. I mean, he was ready to go.

DH: He was.

JH: He was even in bed when Darrell went up. Darrell had let out [inaudible] and he said, "Joe, we need the boat. Come on, there are some people trapped down there." Right down the steps he come, got the boat and they took off. But I was nervous wreck, I'm not kidding. [laughter] I was.

MK: How long was he out?

JH: A good hour. Yes. It was a good hour. But now, (May Bowens?) is another one. Have you talked to her?

MK: No.

JH: Now she stayed in her house through the whole thing. When Darrell comes back, they had told him that someone from the other end got May out. Though they were going to go back after her. I can't remember who it was that they got May out.

DH: Keith.

JH: Was it Keith?

DH: [affirmative]

JH: Then come to find out she had spent the whole night there. But of course, she was okay.

DH: The water can get to [inaudible] deep.

JH: It was up in the downstairs of it. Up at the school –

MK: You noticed what?

JH: The older people are the ones that would come in. I don't know. Every time they would come in, they would want to tell you about it, what happened to them. I know a couple of people they were just so sick of hearing it. But still, it was something they had to talk about. Because they had lived through it. I guess they had to talk about it until they finally got it talked out. But I know that was different with the older ones, like they'd lost their home or something like that. And it was just something they –

MK: Like grieving or something?

JH: It was, yes. They were more or less like in a daze that I found. They didn't know what they were going to do. I'd probably been the same way if I had been in it. I mean, they didn't know where to start. They want to talk about it. I mean, what they had been through and what they lost. Like their pictures, that was the main thing they talked about was the pictures.

MK: Did you get sick of hearing it?

JH: No. I still don't. I mean people still come out and talk to me about it. I'm a good listener. I think if you want to talk about it, you go ahead and talk, because I'm good talker too. [laughter] Well, I can keep a conversation going anyway. [laughter] But no, I don't get tired of hearing it. Yes, it helps him to talk about it.

MK: What about your own children? What has been their reaction to it?

JH: They were fantastic. They worked right along beside me. We clean dishes. We clean mud. We mop floors. We clean malls. Didn't we? [laughter] But we all worked together. We set up a laundromat. That was something else we did. He's wearing the shirt that got bleached. [laughter]

MK: Were the kids at all troubled by it?

JH: I think just from seeing their friends' things destroyed, things like that, they would have to be bothered by it. But still with them helping, I think that relieved a lot of it.

DH: Doing good of a lot of stuff [inaudible] down here and brought them back to them.

JH: Yes. Even these two are my foster children. I've got another foster daughter. She must be up in the bedroom. This is my son. But my foster son and my son found – how much money did you find?

DH: [inaudible]

JH: 50 cent pieces and they gave it back.

MK: You guys are great.

JH: So, I was really proud of them. Because there were a lot of them that would have taken it. They would never say one word about it.

MK: How did you find out who owned it? Somebody from St. George.

Male Speaker: [inaudible]

MK: That's great. So, you feel a lot of growth has come out with people?

JH: I think so. I really do. I mean, you know, it's going to take years. Probably in my lifetime, I'll never see it the way it was. But still, I think the people have learned a lot from it. I have. I think Darrel has.

MK: What have you learned?

JH: Well, it was more like it used to be. I mean, everyone helped the other one. Well, people forget that.

MK: What caused that to dry up or fall off?

JH: I think people just stop caring.

MK: Why? Why would people all of a sudden stop?

JH: Care too much about yourself, I guess. Maybe it took something like that to shake them out and say, "Hey."

DH: People always [inaudible] St. George. [inaudible] and everybody always comes to help you. You don't need to ask them.

JH: Well, that's true. But with this, you didn't have to ask. I mean, everyone was there. That's the way it should be. I mean, when you see somebody in trouble, you shouldn't have to ask. I mean, you should just go help. And that's what we did. [laughter]

MK: That's okay.

[end of transcript]