

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Mary Litman Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Parsons, West Virginia
Length of Interview: 22:51
Interviewer: BM– Beverly McBride
Transcriber: NCC

Beverly McBride: How did you feel when you heard about it? When did you hear about it?

Mary Litman: Well, when I heard about the flood, it seemed it probably came at about the worst time in my life. Because it was the month of November, my teenage daughter was just beginning radiation therapy for treatment of Hodgkin's disease. I had just two or three days before I come out of the hospital for major surgery. I was still in that sort of post operative depression that people sometimes go into, and really wasn't feeling very well. When I got the call from – actually, the call came to me from Fayetteville, North Carolina – that my nephew's wife's sister had called from Thomas, which was above the flood. She had called her in Fayetteville saying the whole town of Parsons was virtually wiped out. So, I quickly got on the phone and called the state police in Elkins, who assured me that there was nothing wrong in Parsons. That it was only the (Blackport bridge?) that was washed out and that the people in Parsons, in fact, were fine. So, something told me, something inside said, "That's not quite the truth." So, I kept trying to reach people in Tucker County, specifically my older sister because I was quite worried about them and I wasn't able to reach anybody. Then for whatever the reason, there seemed to be this big news blackout that nobody really knew what was going on. My own depression became greater. Every time I would go to sleep, I would dream about water. I would dream about my sister. I became thinner. This was over a period of days. Finally, my another brother drove to Tucker County to make sure that everybody was okay. The first call that I got from my sister was my sister, saying, "We're all right down here. You quit worrying about us and get up and get out of bed." So, I did. The bravery of my sister after losing her home – her home for 40 years – completely washed away. My sister calling me to tell me that she was all right, just sort of exemplified to me the spirit of the people of Tucker County. I get real emotional and I hope you don't mind that. But that's what I feel about those brave folks. Since going back to Tucker County after the flood, and seeing my mother's house gone, going to my brother's home, and finding mud up to the ceiling and covered with tennis shoes from the shoe factory. There were just these shoes all over the place. Then seeing my sister's tiny little house, virtually washed away was heartwarming. I suppose I almost felt guilty because I wasn't there. That I was safely away in Pittsburgh and didn't have to deal with mud in my house and losing my pictures and having to go to the church and get a bag of food. I didn't know what to do for my family. I wandered around the town and I looked at things and left really not knowing what to do for those folks. I went over to the Methodist church where my sister was working you know giving people, she was sort of staffing the Food Bank and the clothing bank. Watching her hustle and bustle and sort of take care of other people. Again, it gave me the feeling on one hand that I knew they were going to be alright, because there's so much strength in those people over there. Again, on the other hand that I felt so removed from it, because I had moved away and I wasn't a part of it anymore. Until I was able to sit down with my sister and with my brother and sort of find out how they were feeling. I had a hard time dealing with the flood, because of my own guilt about not being really affected by it. At the same time, I was trying to reach one of my brothers who lived in Luray, Virginia to tell him in case something did come over the news, that in fact, the family was saying that nobody had died. Nobody had been washed away. But I couldn't reach my brother on the phone. Well, then I found out that his home was on the banks of the Shenandoah, and he lost his home too. So, I not only suffered this loss, my family suffered this loss in Parsons, but my brother also in the Luray, Virginia lost his home. His biggest problem was – and I think the people in Parsons was – in dealing with the fact that you had to go and present yourself in front of this member of the bureaucracy. No matter how

sympathetic they were, or how unsympathetic they were, that you had to go and say, "Here I am. I'm a grown man, and I have no clothes." My brother tells the story about they wanted to know how many pairs of pants he had lost. He said, "What the hell? Who knows how many pairs of pants?" He said, "I must have had twelve pairs of pants of various colors and a couple of suits." They said, "Well, in order for you to be reimbursed, you have to have receipts for it." He said, "My home has been washed away. How do you expect me to have receipts for something that I have nothing?" So, those are some of the things that I experienced with my family. Other things that I remember, I specifically remember going to – my mother died about five years in January. When I went to the place where her house would have been washed away in the flood, I just sort of stood there and thought "I'm sort of glad my mom wasn't here." I don't know how she would have been able to survive something as traumatic as that, health reasons and just emotional. Also, I understand from speaking to some of the people from Tucker County that have lost a lot of old folks, a great number of old folks in the past year and a half or so. I think it's just because of this aftermath of the flood and what it did to them. The other thing that my oldest sister suffered a great tragedy about five or six years ago when her husband was killed in a tragic hunting accident by his son. That was a real hard time on the family and then for her to lose her house after the flood was just I thought would be something that would break any normal person. My sister came through with such bravery and I admire her and love her so much. I was at her house the other day and she rebuilt on the same spot. Her neighbor that had lived next to her for 40 years did not rebuild. They had been trapped in their house on the third floor because they had an elderly person with him that they couldn't move. So, they literally waited out that flood and their house turned around on its foundation. They were sitting there with a shotgun across their lap because they said if the water took the house, they were not going to go under with the house. That they were going to end it before the water took the house. But the house stood. Turned right around on its foundation, but it stood. So, they moved away. My sister misses them. She has this nice new house and she's lonely. She wants her old neighbors back. Yet at the same time, I think there's some really character traits about my family and people from Tucker County that they put up this exterior of bravery. So, she'll just sort of say it in an offhand manner. "Well, it's not like the old house." I said, "Well, no, it's so nice." "It's just not like the old house, Mary (Ysabel?). It's just something different. It's not like the old house." Then finally, she did admit once that she missed her neighbors. My brother, who was the sheriff in Tucker County, when he told me the story of almost losing his life in the flood when he went down to St. George to recognize people, old it to me in a sort of offhand casual manner. So, when I heard his voice on the tapes that Michael Kline did in Tucker County, and I heard him tell the real story, that sort of moved me to tears again. Because he told it in a way that was so beautiful and so moving that I sort of wished to be there a second and given him a hug and said how proud I was of him. Now, when I go home, it's sort of still being alien territory. I sometimes go past the street where my sister's houses and have to turn around and come back. That old house for me was sort of like an anchor. No matter how far away from Parsons and Tucker County I went, I always came back. I either came back to my mom's house, or I came back to my sister's house. I knew that I could walk in my sister's house, open up the door, walk in, get a cup of coffee and be at home. So, I missed that also, that sweet little, tiny house that sat by the railroad. But her new home is also available to me and the pot of coffee is still on. My sister's loving face is still there. I still go home to Tucker County. I still go home to Parsons. It's a real important place to me. When news first reached me about the flood, and I was trying to get information about my family, I started calling television stations and radio stations in

Pittsburgh. Because the folks in this part of West Virginia receive all of their information from Pittsburgh via cable. There was nothing. I mean, there was just this tremendous news blackout or uncaring about what was happening in West Virginia. To me, it sort of exemplifies how the outside world feels about West Virginia and that what happens here really isn't important. It really doesn't have a whole lot of meaning. A whole state can be devastated and a whole town can be wiped out. Families can lose homes and people can die. Yet, because it's only West Virginia, there's really not a whole lot of interest in it. Or the interest may be there, but the media is not there to report what is happening. I know that when Charles Kuralt came to West Virginia to do an interview with the people on the flood, that was real important to the folks there because it meant somebody cared. I think as an extension of that what, Michael Kline did with his genius and his love and his very caring attitude about the folks over in Tucker County that he was able to get up – and talk to him about things and feelings. I think that we really needed to talk to somebody about – and not just to each other and not just to family members. They needed to talk to somebody like Michael Kline, to sort of sort through their feelings and make some kind of sense out of the chaotic madness that the flood was and what it did to their lives. My own feeling about listening to the voices that it gave me, first of all, such a feeling of pride for those people. Second of all, that it made me shed some tears that I needed to shed. I thank Michael Kline for what he did. The crew from CBS News and Charles Kuralt came back to West Virginia a year later to just sort of see how folks were faring after the flood. I think that again, those kinds of things really help the people of Tucker County really understand that they weren't completely forgotten in the world, and at least them folks to care about this beautiful little mountain town that had been so devastated.

BM: When people from outside come in, and say it's important that sort of reinforces your own feeling of importance –

ML: It gives validity, I think. This horrible thing happened. Now, how do you make sense out of it? What can you do to make it fit into something that you can deal with, and then put it aside? So, it's like the pictures that were in Killing Waters. The folks can take those books out, and they can open them up and they can look at them and they can remember. It's a focal point for them to look at and say, "Oh, yeah. I was doing this and something was happening." It does give some sort of order out of chaos. I think that's what maybe some very, very deep, subconscious thing that chaos is going to overcome us all. So, the sense of restoring order, I think, is real important. The restoring order, a part of it is to talk it out and make it make sense. People coming in and helping you do that, which is what CBS News did, is what John Warner did, and what Michael Kline is doing and what you're doing for me right now is to sort of help me understand and have it all made sense.

BM: Well, ultimately get closure.

ML: Yes. Well, I think that Michael takes a lot of that. Again, I'm not a superstitious person but being there that evening, completely unplanned, not knowing that Michael was going to be there, not knowing that the tapes were even remotely ready for airing, and then to be able to sit down and listen to them. Again, in a very supportive atmosphere with a lot of understanding sympathetic folks around was very healing for me. I think I was meant to be there. I think it was supposed to happen, just as it happened.

[end of transcript]