

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Roger Lee Morral Oral History
Date of Interview: February 14, 1986
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 00:27:07
Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Kline: Roger.

Roger Lee Morral, Sr.: Lee Morral, Sr.

MK: M-O-O-R?

RLMS: M-O-R-R-A-L, Sr.

MK: Morral.

RLMS: Morral, yes. I was born in Reisterstown, Maryland, November 11th, 1950. Yes. 11th month, 29th day, 1950. My daddy's name is Melvin Dale Morral. He was born long ago. My mother is Lucille Harrison from Petersburg. I've got two sisters and two brothers. My oldest sister's name is Sarah Lee Conaway. My youngest sister is named Delphi Ann Morral. I got a brother that's named Melvin Dale Morral. I've got a little brother named Dukey. Well, I guess he's about fifteen years old. I left them back in 1953, came up here, and stayed with my aunt and uncle. They took care of me and raised me up. I stayed here for nineteen years with the community of the people. Awful nice. Then I went to Maryland. I worked down there for six years and got married in 1977 to Deborah Lynn Steinberg. We lived down there until 1980. We moved back here to take care of my Aunt Mabel Hendrick, which she's seventy-two years old. Then we had two children. Their names are Roger Lee Morral, Jr. and Tabitha Jane Morral. You want to stop that thing now?

MK: Yes. You were telling me about your children.

RLMS: Yes. I've got two children. One's name is Roger Lee Morral, Jr. He's three years old. I've got a daughter named Tabitha Jane Morral. She's four.

MK: You live?

RLMS: I live up the road here about a half a mile on Priscilla Teter's Farm. I helped her here out because she had a broken leg. We've been good friends all of her life.

MK: Well, she's lucky to have a man like you.

RLMS: Yes. Well, she's just like a mother to me. On November 4th, it was raining, and I came down. Water was running across the road out here. So, I was up there trying to get the water straightened out, so it would go through the culverts. We called down about her sister and her brother-in-law and wanted to know if they wanted to come out. I guess it was around noon. We called down. They said, no, they were going to wait a while because Aunt Pearl was catching water. It was ripping down through the ceiling of her trailer.

MK: Their trailer was where?

RLMS: Down Seneca going towards Petersburg down there. Down the banks where Silver Station was. So, we called, and they didn't want to come. So, we waited a while. I was back up

there by the road cleaning out. After a while, they called back and said they didn't know if I could come in and get them or not. So, Priscilla, she ran out and told me. She said, "Go down and see if you can get them." So, I left here flying. Down the road I went, cut down there to Seneca. The water was running across the road. I asked this man, I said, "Do you think I can make it across?" He said, "Oh, yes, you can make it." So, on down through there I went. I got down where I could see their trailer, and I could see the water coming in this way and going down around behind them. So, I cut up in the neighbor's driveway and went out through the field there and went across. When I went across, the water was clearly on top of my tires of the truck. So, I went down around the back, and the water there was still way deep in there. So, I pulled right up behind Aunt Pearl's trailer, and I jumped out. The water was up to my waist almost. I went to her door, and I said, "Come on." She opened the door, and I just reached and grabbed her in my arms and brought her out and set her in the truck. She didn't get a bit wet. By that time, Catherine and John were coming out. Catherine, she got in the front seat with me and Aunt Pearl. John got on the bumper. So, I backed out and started out the driveway, and I got out within 25 feet of the road. The water just came in so fast, just drowning my truck out. So, there I was, we were stuck. I didn't open the door. So, I crawled out the window and crawled around the back, went around the lower side and opened the lower side door and got Catherine out and helped her back to John. They got back to the house. So, I carried Aunt Pearl back to the house myself on my arms. Never got her wet. We all went in there, and they gave me some clothes, gave me a pair of pants and a pair of shoes and a shirt. I put it on. We all stood there, and the water just kept raising and raising. We could look out the window, and there were trailers set right straight across from us over there. After a while, we saw it flop over. Down the other side of the road, it went. After a while, we looked out, and the truck was sitting there. After a while, the truck just flopped over. The water just upset it right in front of the trailer. We sat and watched it there a little while, water came on. It got up on the porch. Then after a while, it rolled it over again. Rolled it with the wheels, sticking straight up. It was starting to get dark then, looked out for John's car which was sitting in the garage. It was kind of in a break. This car was sitting like this. I said, "John," I said, "your car is going sideways." "Oh, no, it isn't going sideways." I said, "Yes, it is too." So, he weighed the water over and looked out. The car was going like this in the garage. The water just was forced in like that. It was just pushing the car backwards and forth just like this. So, we sat there a while, and water kept getting deeper. So, we got the dinner table out of the kitchen, brought it in the living room. Well, it had an owl like this. This little cabinet sat over here, and the sink went here. So, we had the table set in there. So, we all got up on the table. We stood there a while. The water kept getting deeper and deeper. After a while, he got on top of the table. The chair started floating over to me. So, so reached down and got a chair. I set it up on the table. So, the older woman, she sat down on one, Mrs. Lewis. Catherine, she stood up there on the table, and John, he did too. I stood over on that little counter. We thought maybe it might not get any higher. Well, the water just kept raising. After a while, it got up to where the doorknob is on the trailer where you open the knob of the trailer. By that time, it was taking up some fuel tanks and taking the gas tanks off of the trailer and taking them down the river too. So, we sat there a while. After a while, I said, "John, I'm going to cut a hole through the roof." He said, "No, don't cut a hole through the roof." He said, "Wait a while." I sat there a while longer. So, after a while I said, "John, I'm going to cut my hole through." Well, he said, "Go ahead." So, I cut a hole up through there with my pocketknife, and I couldn't get up. There was a flat board in there, about 4 inches wide and about that thick. So, I couldn't get it up through there. So, I moved over just a little ways and

cut another hole. By that time, it started cracking on the sides. You could hear the sides. It just seemed like they were in and out. I got the hole cut up through it. Just as I got the hole cut in, it really cracked. I took my head up through. Just before that, I looked down, and I said, "You all know we're going to die." I stuck my head up through and just pulled myself up. I could feel the trailer going. I wasn't quite up on it yet, but I got up on top of it. As it went down the creek, oh, it went 500 yards. Went down the creek there and it hit a bunch of trees. Well, it'd done toting too. It was just part of it there. It lodged in against there. Just before it hit, I saw this limb. I grabbed a hold of it and got up. Just as I got up, another building came in, right there against the trailer and hit that tree I was on. It hit me in the leg, just about knocked me out. I still had my flashlight though. I thought I heard somebody holler. So, I shined my flashlight down there where the pieces of the trailer were. I shined back a little bit, and there was a black hose sticking out there. There was Catherine hanging on. She'd rode inside of that thing that far until it hit. She was hanging on that black hose. I hollered. I said, "Come on Catherine." I said, "You can get up on top of this thing." She kept wiggling, wiggling, wiggling. Finally, she got up on top of it. I told her to take her belt off and tie herself to the tree limb. Well, the tree wasn't very big. It was just a little thing like that bent down. Everything came down by, hit it. She said, "It's taking the tree out." So, she took her belt off and put it up around the tree. She stood there a long time. After a while, I looked down, and I saw her fall off backwards. I guess her belt broke. She lost hope, fell off backwards. But anyway, before that, she asked me if I'd seen Uncle John and Aunt Pearl. I said, "No, Catherine, I never saw them." Then I did ask her this too before she fell, I said, "What time is it?" She said, "It's 8:30 p.m." Shortly after, that's when she fell off. It wasn't but a little bit after that until it took the rest of the trailer, smashed it onto pieces, moved it on down the hill. But I couldn't reach her. She was about 10 feet from me. I couldn't reach her. So, I stayed there in the tree. It was cold. It rained. I still had the flashlight, and this old building had lodged in there. I looked down. I thought I could see a piece of black installation. So, I reached down and got it. Lucky enough, it was about that long. So, I took it and wrapped it around my shoulders. But I thought I could see cars coming down the road and coming so far and turning. I had the flashlight, and I kept shining it around and across the creek. No, I guess it was far as near that barn from me and seeing these guys out over there with big spotlight. I guess they were coming down and looking how deep the water was. But anyway, they happened to see my light there, and they walked down along the creek to about where they thought I was at. They could see my light, and they shined their light straight across. They could see my light. So, I didn't see no more of them. They left. Next morning, the break of daylight, here they come back down four of them. Those same people, they walked back down, and they looked over. They pointed over that I was in the tree. They didn't know who it was. So, about fifteen, twenty minutes later, four girls came down along there, and they took my picture across there. But during that time, those boys, they'd walk from their home, clear back up here to Seneca, and told some people that they thought John McMillan was in the tree. So, the girls, they took pictures of me, and they motioned for me to get out of there. So, I wouldn't do it. So, I stayed there a little while. The water, it went down and directly shot right back up. It raised. I was afraid to try it. So, I almost stood there another hour. It was about 9:30 a.m., I guess. I said, "Well, I'm either going to dry land, or I'm going to drown." So, I found me an old stick there, and I punched it in. But the water was really rolling down. It was almost up to my waist on both sides of me. I didn't know how deep a hole it was. I'd seen worse holes there. I didn't know if it was a big hole there below the tree or not. Anyway, I got across, got out there in the water, and stuck my stick in. I waded out. I waded up to dry land. So, I walked from there, clear back up here to Coopers

Rocks and I saw (Minor Vance?) over there in his truck. He'd come that far. I hollered over and told him I needed help. Some of his buddies were going down the back side, down against the mountain, going down. They hollered for me to go back. So, I turned around. I went back down to where the trailer was washed away. I looked over, and it was Minor Vance standing on the porch barefoot. I didn't know he was in that house all night. But anyway, he said they were coming in to get him with a boat. So, they came in and got him with a boat, and I walked down the road. But I saw the houses go, all the garages go that night, all of it. I saw everything go.

MK: Longest night in your life, huh?

RLMS: Oh, man, it was a nightmare. It just sounded like a big old jitter roaring all the time. That water really had a lot of under current. It just kept roaring right under hard. You dropped anything, in a second, it was gone. I don't want to see no more of them.

MK: What's it been like for you since then?

RLMS: Well, it's been pretty hard. You don't get much sleep. If you don't keep busy, keep your mind on something, you start thinking about it. You just keep going on and on and on, most the time at nighttime.

MK: You've had a lot of dreams about it?

RLMS: Yes, quite a bit, like fighting in bed at nighttime.

MK: I guess a lot of guys coming back from Vietnam had that kind of experience of they couldn't stop fighting. They couldn't stop the war. Is that what it was like for you?

RLMS: Yes. Well, if you wouldn't have been really tough, you'd never stood it. It was just so cold. It was cold. I just about froze to death. My legs were blue. From hip to toe down, I was blue.

MK: You were telling me about how you were shivering from that, and your body was cramping.

RLMS: Oh, yes. I had cramps in my belly and my arms. The only thing I guess really saved me to stay on, I took my belt off and tied it around a limb above me and stuck my arm in. I changed from arm to arm instead of hugging the tree like this, so it wouldn't be so much strain on it.

MK: That was smart.

RLMS: Yes, I used my head. They came home and told my wife and them that they thought it was Johnny in the trees. They said then, "No, it's not Johnny. It's got to be Gorgy." He said, "He's like a damn monkey anyway [laughter]." I was good. I always climbed trees.

MK: So, you actually grabbed on this limb when the trailer was going?

RLMS: Yes. When the trailer was going, I saw it. If I hadn't had a flashlight, I'd never see it. Which after when it hit, would have knocked me off the top of it anyway. But I happened to see it, and it was hanging down. When it came into it, I reached over and grabbed it and swung myself up. Just as I got up and got my arms around the tree, I hadn't got my other leg up on it yet, when that building came in and hit my leg and the limb I was standing on. Just about knocked me out. But I hung on. Then that's when I got Catherine up and tried to get her over. I couldn't get her to me. She couldn't make it too far.

MK: How long was it, Roger, until you were able to get back up to your wife and children after that?

RLMS: Well, I spent about fourteen and a half hours on that tree, well, altogether. After I got out, I stayed down there the rest of that day and the next night and came home the next day. I guess I got here about – what time was it, Aunt Peele? 10:00 a.m.?

Female Speaker: Something thereabout.

RLMS: About 10:00 a.m.

MK: They didn't know until then that you had survived?

RLMS: Oh, yes, they knew. Some people told them that I was all right.

MK: How did you get back here, Roger?

RLMS: Jake Cosmo brought me up.

MK: Was he able to drive up here or –

RLMS: Oh, yes, we drove all the way up. We'd come home that day that I got out. But some places, the water was still too deep. We couldn't quite make it. Some holes in the road, we didn't know how deep they were. But I could have walked home, I guess.

MK: What did the county look to you like when the sun came up?

RLMS: [laughter] Disaster. Nothing. All gone. Just like a hurricane came through and just wiped it all.

MK: Did you have trouble believing what you saw?

RLMS: Yes, a little bit. It was hard to think about what the water had really done. I know it was bad, and I knew it was bad going on down here. The further it got down, the worse it got. The more damage that would have done because you got more powers. As it went on down the valley, she picked up more speed and had more debris on it to knock down things and wipe it out. Some people were lucky, and some weren't. It just seemed to me like we just weeded them out, weed the good ones out from the bad ones. The whole saying is, left the bad and took the

good one, in my book. Yes, me and John, we were close and Catherine. Me and John hunted together. An awful thing.

MK: How long had they lived there in that trailer?

RLMS: Since [19]71, wasn't it?

FS: Yes.

RLMS: Since [19]71.

MK: Had the water ever gotten up?

RLMS: Yes, I think it'd been in around there a few times.

FS: Been in the basement a little while, but not up around the house.

RLMS: Yes. It run down in front of them a couple of times, didn't it?

FS: Yes.

RLMS: But it never got up in the trailer.

MK: So, they never felt shaky about living there?

RLMS: Well, [laughter] I don't know too much about that. She could tell you more about it than I can.

FS: No. John said he liked it better than any place he'd ever lived in his life. After he retired, he really enjoyed it.

MK: That was a beautiful spot down here, wasn't it before the floods?

FS: Yes, it was.

MK: Right there on the banks of the river.

RLMS: Yes. It was a beautiful place. But never know with that water though, just wipe things out.

MK: Roger, do you think you're all right now?

RLMS: Yes, I'm getting along. I'm getting straightened up pretty good now.

MK: Because what you just told me would be enough to buckle the minds of a lot of people.

RLMS: Well, yes, it hurt. Yes, I know it works on your mind. You just can't let it bother you. You've got to try to keep busy and keep your mind off of it. If you just sit down and start thinking about it or even start talking about it, it makes it worse.

MK: Do you think it's bad to talk about it?

RLMS: Yes, I think it is. I think it brings back old memories. It's best to try to forget if you can.

MK: But those things are in there, you know?

RLMS: Oh, yes, I know they're in there. But I try not to talk about it as much if I can help it.

MK: But those things are inside of you, and they have to come out.

RLMS: Oh, yes, you have to bring them out. Yes, that's true too. But I think really, it's once you said it, you shouldn't have to say it again. Everybody should know. You've told your story. I've told this story, I bet, twenty-five times.

MK: It may be good for you.

RLMS: Well, it might be, and again, it might not be.

FS: Yes, it's got to get out.

RLMS: But they were my good friends, and I don't like to talk about it really. But you've got to tell what you've got to tell. It's hard, but you just sit down and tell it. That's all you can do.

MK: You're an awful good storyteller.

RLMS: [laughter] Well, I never did. I always was bashful. I never could talk very good.

MK: Oh, you talk fine. You're a good teller. I'd like to hear you tell some other things.

RLMS: [laughter] Well, that's about all I can tell you.

MK: I bet you've got some good hunting stories.

RLMS: Oh, yes, I've got a lot of good hunting stories.

MK: Did you and John ever kill any bears?

RLMS: No, never killed any bear. We killed quite a few squirrels.

MK: He was a good hunter?

RLMS: Yes. He liked hunting, but he couldn't walk around very good. His legs hurt him off a bit. But he loved to hunt, loved to drink his whiskey. Me and him used to drink a lot of whiskey. Yes, I just finished his house, the one room he had down there. He wanted me to panel and drop the ceiling in. We got it all done. We did it on Thursday before this happened. I just finished it up all, and it was beautiful. We just got it done, and this thing happened Monday.

MK: So, you had been spending a whole lot of time with him?

RLMS: Oh, well, all around, yes. We'd go down and make hay. We'd help him make his hay. He came up here, and we sat down and talked. He came to my house. We'd visit quite a regular, didn't we, Peele?

FS: Yes.

RLMS: He was really nice. I liked him and Catherine both. Aunt Pearl, I didn't know her too well, not like I did Catherine and John. Catherine probably diapered my behind when I was a baby.

MK: Tell me again, you were related by blood to them?

RLMS: No, just good friends, neighbors. We've been neighbors all of our life. Aunt Pearl's diapered me many times. When I first came here, I was just a little fellow. My arms were only about that big around. I was about starved to death. My mother did that.

MK: Cut your chin?

RLMS: Butcher knife. I was three years old. I got anything to eat really. I didn't get to eat with rest of the family, hardly any. I sat behind a chair. The chair was sitting in the corner like this, and I sat in the corner. I wanted anything to eat, I went out and waited until they left. Then I'd go out and go around the house and go up to my granddaddy's house. He lived about 50 feet from us. They'd give me cookies and milk. Then I'd go back to the house. Now, she was pretty rough on me.

MK: Why was she so hard on you?

RLMS: I don't know. I don't guess she liked me very good. I was the black sheep of the family.

MK: But you found a wife to like you?

RLMS: Huh?

MK: You found a wife who likes you.

RLMS: Oh, yes. My aunt likes me too. She's the one who raised me. I lived with them for nineteen years. Yes, my wife, well, she's pretty good when she wants to be. Sometimes she can be [inaudible]. I guess they all get that way.

MK: Well, he's a wonderful man.

FS: Yes.

MK: You've got anything else that I can add to that? I would like to use this material maybe in some radio work or –

RLMS: Go ahead.

MK: – book or whatever. Is that all right?

RLMS: Yes. It's all right with me if it's all right with Aunt Peele.

FS: Go ahead. Why should I –

[end of transcript]