Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Mike Smith Oral History
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Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Kline: Well, give me your full name while we're at it.

Michael Smith: My full name is Michael D. Smith.

MK: What's the D for?

MS: D stands for Duane.

MK: Duane. Where were you raised?

MS: That's a good West Virginia name. I was born in a little town called Newell, which is up in Hancock County, way up in the northern part of the state. I lived in Newell until I was about thirteen and moved with my family to a little town called Ravenswood. It's in the western part of the state, south of Parkersburg. My father had worked in a steel mill when we were living in Newell. They were building a Kaiser Aluminum factory down in Ravenswood. People came there from all over the United States to live and work there. My wife, in fact, moved there shortly after I moved there. Her father did the same thing. He had worked in a chemical factory and moved there to take this new job with Kaiser Aluminum. So, I met my wife when, I guess, I was about sixteen, and she was fourteen, I think. So, we've been together for a lot of years. We went to high school together and then college together and have been married now for about eighteen years. So, we've spent most of our lives together after being high school sweethearts.

MK: That's great.

MS: I've lived around the state most of my life after Ravenswood. I went to college at Morgantown and was drafted into the army and spent some time in Vietnam. Then came back from Vietnam and lived in Charleston and lived in Spencer and lived in Morgantown again. Took some time off right after getting back from Vietnam just to travel around the country for a while in a Volkswagen van and try to make some sense of my life after coming back from Vietnam, try to find some direction for myself. That was a real valuable time for me. I think I found at least that human beings were certainly more important than anything material. Previous to my experience in Vietnam, I had spent a lot of time of thinking about how I could get ahead and get a good job and get what I considered the better things in life. Then I think that experience in Vietnam gave me a chance to sit back and reflect on what was really important for me. I think the trip after coming back from Vietnam was an attempt to kind of reaffirm what I had thought or to search around the country and find people that had similar beliefs and similar viewpoints. I'm really going off on a tangent. I don't know where I am.

MK: That's all right.

MS: I guess I'm trying to find some way of bringing this back to –

MK: There's some way you get out of this mental health [inaudible]?

MS: Oh, yes, the mental health. When I was in college, I had majored in psychology and then went to graduate school in rehabilitation counseling. Then was kind of sidetracked by the

experience in the army and in Vietnam and came back.

MK: Then you had to rehabilitate yourself?

MS: I had to rehabilitate myself for several years through alcoholism and drug addiction and various other things. I guess during that time, I discovered that I enjoyed working with people, that I enjoyed sitting down and talking with people and communicating with people. It was probably one of the more positive experiences that I had during a period when positive experiences were few and far between. But I found out if I could sit down and start talking to somebody and sharing a part of myself, that something seemed to happen, something almost magical at times. When you got out of yourself, you got beyond yourself. It was a real rich and rewarding experience. So, after several years of odd jobs, doing this and that just to get by while I was rehabilitating myself, I finally decided that the next step in my rehabilitation was to work with other people. So, I took a job at Spencer State Hospital, working on a drug and alcohol treatment unit and worked there for a few years and also worked on a treatment unit for emotionally disturbed adolescents. I did that for a while. Then I decided I needed a break from that type of work. Without any experience at all, bought a workshop in a little town in Rome County called Reedy. I started making wooden furniture and doing wood sculpture. My wife did that in her vo-tech woodworking class. She has more talent than I do working with wood. Then after doing that for a while and deciding that that wasn't what I really wanted to do with the rest of my life, we moved to Morgantown. A few more odd jobs came my way. Then I got a job working as a counselor at a medical center, a genetics counselor. Found that once again I enjoyed working with people and meeting with people, sitting down, and talking with people. But I wasn't really satisfied living in Morgantown. It was just a little bit too large for me. I had found that I really got quite a bit of peacefulness out of living in a rural environment. I just was not happy there. So, I'd always wanted to live in Elkins and had looked, for a number of years, for ways that I could move here. At a very opportune time, I found out about a job at the mental health center in the children's program working as a children's counselor. So, I applied for the job and was able to get it. So, that's how I ended up living in the Elkins area and working in the Elkins area. I've worked there, I guess, for about three and a half years now. I enjoy my work incredibly. I didn't know that it would really be possible to find a job that you could really enjoy every day, that you could go in and get some enjoyment out of your work and really look forward to the next day. But I have to say that I've been lucky enough to find a job like that.

MK: What has been the role of the Appalachian Mental Health Center in dealing with the flood people?

MS: Well, initially, the mental health center was very concerned about helping people. But because they had never been involved in a disaster, they weren't quite sure how to go about it. We had a few planning meetings. It was more or less decided that we really can't give you any kind of organizational directive as to what to do. The best thing we can tell you to do is just to go out there on your own and find ways in the community that you can be helpful. I really appreciated that honesty because maybe they might have – well, I guess they really couldn't have faked that. Because the administration just did not know what to do, could not tell people what to do. So, really this whole flood recovery effort, I guess, has been more or less one of starting from scratch. I think initially people did that. People went out on their own and people found

ways that they could be involved. In the meantime, there has been a lot of direction given to the flood recovery efforts from the Appalachian Mental Health Center. Dr. Ports has applied for grants that have funded a number of positions in our four-county catchment area, Tucker, Randolph, Upshur, and Barbour. We have a coordinator that coordinates services in all four of those counties now. Those people have done a lot to help people work through the maze of the bureaucracy in terms of getting recovery benefits and just being available to talk to people and counsel with people in crisis situations. My own experience in Pendleton County started from that initial directive, though, just to go out in the community and find ways that you can be helpful. My first thoughts were to try to work in areas close at hand. I tried to plug into efforts that were going on in the Harman and the Job and Whitmer area. But after going into those areas as a representative of the mental health center, I found that people weren't really in need of what they saw as mental health services. The people living in, I guess, the more remote areas of Randolph County are very proud and very independent people. They had a real strong feeling of, we can do it on our own, we can organize, and we can do whatever is necessary to get ourselves back on our feet. I could respect that. Yet at the same time, I felt like there was something going on out there. There was this flood. I just had a real strong feeling that I had to be involved in some aspect of the flood recovery. It was about that time that Mike Meador of the Northfork Flood Recovery Office in Riverton sent a letter to the mental health center asking for volunteers to work in Pendleton County. Because Pendleton County is a physically large county and parts of it are very isolated and very remote. The road system in that county had been torn up very badly. It was very difficult to get from one part of the county to another part. They were in need of people to work in the county, going out and talking to the people and making assessments of their needs. So, I worked with Daisy Arbogast, who had grown up and lived in the Circleville area before moving to Elkins and working at the Appalachian Mental Health Center. As soon as the flood hit, Daisy had gone back to her home and had worked there for about a six-week period, pretty much seven days a week nonstop during that time. Was a real help to the initial efforts to form an organization, a recovery organization in the county. So, I met with Daisy and found out what she was doing and asked if there was any way that I could help out. She said yes that there was a need for other people to help out in the county, to go out and talk with people and to get an assessment of their needs and to be involved in crisis counseling. Because there had been several people that had lost their lives and several people that had lost family members and a great deal of physical destruction. So, I started going out and doing the needs assessment. Then pretty soon was getting referrals from other workers in the area because of my mental health background and experience. So, I would go out and talk to people. I was given the geographical area from Malthus, Seneca down along the Northfork, down to the Grant County line. Then the area around (Onego?) and Brushy Run and Roaring Creek because that was closer to my home and easier to get to and a little further away from the recovery office down at Riverton. So, I worked in that area, I guess. I'm trying to think of when I went into Pendleton County. I went in as soon as the roads were open to Pendleton County. I can't remember the exact date of that now. I think it was right around –

MK: [inaudible]

MS: No. It was at least a couple weeks after the flooding. It was probably somewhere around the end of November and had been working there since that time. Initially, I was able to get time off from my job in Elkins to go over there on pretty much a full-time basis. I was working there

five days a week. As other people were hired to work in that area, I was able to – or actually, I had to return to part of my job over in Elkins. So, I've been going over there, I guess, one day a week. Then just recently, one day every two weeks.

MK: When did you meet Helen and Priscilla and Roger?

MS: The three of them were referred to me during the first couple days of my involvement in Pendleton County. People had met with Roger and Priscilla previously and knew that they had been through a very traumatic situation. Roger, in an attempt to save Priscilla's sister and her sister's husband and her husband's aunt, that he had been through a great deal of stress and was showing some symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder where he was having some bad dreams and some flashbacks going back to the time of the flooding in his sleep. So –

MK: Is that when he cut his way out of the trailer?

MS: Yes. That's when –

MK: Do you feel comfortable about talking about his case, or is it a violation?

MS: Well, I feel like the details would probably be confidential. I really wouldn't want to go into those details. I'm trying to walk the line right now, trying to figure out how much I should –

MK: [unintelligible 00:18:00].

MS: – reveal. I think what I had mentioned just earlier are things that he talked about when he had his interview with you. So, I think that that wouldn't be a breach of confidentiality. But without really elaborating on Roger's situation, people were concerned about him. When I met with Roger, I found out that Roger is a tough little nut, that he had been through a difficult time. But he has a tremendous amount of strength and courage and resilience and was going through pretty much a normal process of dealing with the trauma that he had been through. It wasn't a matter of just doing this one day and then returning to a normal life the next day. There were some emotional overtones. But Roger was working through those very adequately, very successfully. Priscilla had lost three people in a very short span of time that were very close to her. It constituted her family in Pendleton County. So, I think, once again, it wasn't so much their own needs, but other people's, other friends', and neighbors' concerns about them that brought them to my attention. People just said, "Stop by and check with them and see how they're doing." They have, once again, Priscilla, like Roger, has had a difficult time. She's gone through a very stressful and a grieving period, but she's dealing with it and seems to be making progress as time goes by. I met Helen when I went to visit with Priscilla. I had been down on Brushy Run, talking to all the people up on the hollow, but had not been able to make contact with Helen because right after the flood, she had gone to stay with her sister. But when I went up to visit with Priscilla, Helen had just returned from her daughter's. I sat down with her. She told me her story about living down on Brushy Run and spending that night in a barn, watching the creek roar past the barn filled with people's homes and trailers and rocks and trees and just about everything imaginable. Helen was in a great deal of need. She had not only lost her home, but she had lost the land on which the home was sitting. She couldn't rebuild. Even if she

wanted to, she had no land left to put it on. Priscilla had lost her family. They had been friends since childhood. They seemed to form a real important, I guess, substitute family for each other. Priscilla needed a family, and Helen needed a place to live. Priscilla offered Helen a piece of land on her property, so that she could put her government trailer. At the same time, Helen was able to be a kind of a sister or a friend and a family member to Priscilla. So, what happened probably illustrates what happened time and time again all throughout the region that was flooded, that people themselves provided the most support to each other, just friends and neighbors helping each other, and people moving in with friends and neighbors. That was very, very evident in Pendleton County. In fact, there weren't really that many people in Pendleton County that actually required the temporary housing in the forms of the mobile homes from the government. People had friends or relatives that they could just move in with and stay. Helen, in talking with her, she's had a lot of life experience that could probably tend to make a person somewhat hard and callous, but I've found just the opposite has been true. She's become probably more kind and more gentle and more sensitive with all of her experiences. At the same time, she's a woman that knows what she wants and what she needs in order to get by and survive. When FEMA tried to take her away from Priscilla's property and move her into the group site down at Seneca, found out that Helen was a tough cookie when it came to dealing with bureaucrats. She made it known what she wanted. She fought them tooth and nail until she was able to get what she wanted, which was nothing more than to be able to stay up there on Timber Ridge and to stay there with the friend whose friendship was so important to both of them. I think that this whole process, this whole experience has been an education for everybody concerned. I think it's been a real experience for the FEMA people who initially at least didn't understand the rural West Virginia culture and how important the sense of community and the sense of belonging to that community was. People that grew up and lived in Brushy Run were a part of that community of Brushy Run. People that lived on Roaring Creek were a part of that community. When the government said, "Well, we're building this group site and it's only three miles from your home and it's just right down the road in Seneca," they didn't realize that Seneca was another world to these people in a sense. It wasn't Brushy Run and it wasn't Roaring Creek. Those people didn't want to leave their communities to get down to those group sites. In particular, most of them, unless they absolutely had a choice, didn't want to go into a group site anyway. Because Pendleton County, at least the Northfork area of Pendleton County, doesn't have group sites, doesn't have trailer parks. Those people liked to live with a little bit of space between them and their neighbors. A lot of them talked about stories that they had heard about people living in trailer parks and how everybody's business is everybody else's business. They just didn't want any part of that. Most of them fought that tooth and nail. Unfortunately, not all of them were able to really resist to the end and get what they wanted. A lot of them did decide to take the government trailer and the group sites. But a lot of them held out. They eventually did get just what they wanted.

MK: Did you tell me that Helen had been kind of a symbol, or you didn't talk about that?

MS: Well, yes. Maybe that's only my interpretation. But I was very proud of Helen Seitz because this whole process took several weeks. On a number of occasions, she met with obstacles every step of the way. There were a number of times when she could have just said – it looked like she was facing insurmountable odds in getting what she wanted, which was a trailer on Priscilla's property. There was so much pressure being put upon her to move into the group

site, and yet she didn't. She had nothing left. She lost every possession that she had in that flood with the exception of her truck. She had nothing left. She was staying in friends' and relatives' homes. She might have just said, "I give up. I'll go along with it." But she didn't. She knew that she wouldn't be happy. She knew that if she did move away from Priscilla, then it was really going to be detrimental to Priscilla. So, she said, "I can't give up. I just can't give up. I've got to fight for what I believe in." She did that. I think that Helen, that situation has become known to a lot of people, not only in Pendleton County but in other counties as well about Helen's situation. I think, to a large extent, she has been a symbol for people standing up for what they feel they want and what they feel they need.

MK: Could you comment a little bit on what happened today?

MS: Well, I've never quite known what to expect when I go to visit Helen and Priscilla and Roger. Today was no exception. They're very warm and friendly people. One of the richest experiences I've had in my work in Pendleton County has been to meet the people there and to find that sense of community that still exists there where people care about each other and are concerned about each other and have the time to spend with each other. When you go to their home, they welcome you back, and you know it's sincere. You know that they're not just saying it to be sociable, but they actually are meaning it. I have to be honest in saying that I have, no doubt, gained more from the people that I've worked with than I've been able to give them or to share with them. Much of this experience has been a selfish experience for me because I've gotten so much from the people that I've met and I've worked with. I've found a sense of community in those areas, those remote areas of Pendleton County that I've not always experienced. But back to the original question, after going off on a tangent there, I found it's been real important for people to tell their stories from the very beginning. It's been one of the most valuable and therapeutic processes that I've observed that people have experienced. Just about everybody that has had any contact with the flood, either as a victim or as a recovery worker, has had a need to talk about their experiences. It seems to be a real important step in understanding the experience and dealing with the emotions related to the experience. Of course, today was not the first time that any of them had told their stories. They had told them time and time again to various people. But each time that it's told, it's of equal importance. It never gets to the point where it's told – those stories have not gotten to the point where they're told without the emotion, I think, as you observed.

MK: – more stories.

MS: When people tell those stories, they have a chance to re-experience the emotion involved with their initial flood experience and to make some type of determination as to how they're going to deal with it at that particular point in time. It seems like maybe each time they can decide how much of that pain and how much of that grief they still want to hold on to, how much is necessary for them for some reason that's probably known only to them. But each time they do it, I think it gives them a different perspective and allows them to maybe go through the experience in a more positive and perhaps a less traumatic way. I think as you saw today that each time the person sat down to tell the story, they were transported right back to that day in early November when the flood occurred. It was a very powerful experience for them. I think that although the stories have been told, they weren't told in the presence of each other. I think

that was one of the valuable things that took place today, is that Roger, for example, was very concerned about how Priscilla might feel after hearing him tell a story about her family being killed in the flood. Of course, we were careful to check that out with Priscilla to see if she felt comfortable about being there while Roger was telling the story. She said that she did. That if any part of it got to be too much for her, that she would just get up and leave the room, which she did at different times during Roger's narration. But she also was able to hear it even when she left the room. She, I think, found that she can hear the very vivid details of Roger's account and that Roger was able to tell this story in front of Priscilla. I think, in a sense, that that probably shows another part of the healing process that's going on there.

MK: Helen, too. I didn't know if Roger had ever really heard Helen's story before. That seemed to set the stage for him to be able to tell his somehow.

MS: I think you're right. I think that while Roger had probably heard bits and pieces of it, I think each time the story is told, it's a little different. I think today, all the stories were about as deep as they could go in reliving their experiences of the flooding. I think that there was some important process that was going on there today that I can't fully put into words, but it seemed to be important for them. When I talked with them about your coming over to tape their stories, there was absolutely no reluctance. I think all three of them felt that this was as painful as it sometimes was to recount these experiences. It was very important to somehow record these experiences. It was very important for them. It was very important for what they saw as the history of Pendleton County for people to know, for future generations, perhaps their own family members to know what they had experienced and would be, in turn, a part of their heritage. So, what happened today, I think, was very important for all three of them. Even though after talking with Roger, he expressed some initial reluctance to retell his story. He also seemed to feel and to describe in his own way how important it was to be a part of that with Helen and Priscilla.

MK: Is there a kind of bonding – is that the right word – that goes on with people? They've been torn loose from everything they previously had, right? They're looking for ways back. Is this kind of sharing a step in that rebonding or bonding? Am I using the right term?

MS: I really don't know what the right term would be, Michael. There are so many psychological terms that are used often to describe those processes. But I think that it was evident just from sitting in a room today that there was a real important relationship that had evolved between the three of them, having shared that experience. It's almost as if when the three of them are in the room, they are almost psychic. They know what each other has felt. They know what each other have experienced. They're always on the same frequency. I think that they can go to each other for support and they can go to each other when they have to find that person that understands. They have that in the special relationship that the three of them have. So, I think it is important. I don't know how it is. I can't exactly put it into words, but I just know it is important. Well, they were, before the flood, three very good friends. But I think that they're even closer now after their experiences.

MK: What do you feel about what happened to Roger? What do you think Roger feels about it? For example, is Roger satisfied that he did all that he could do, or does he feel that there are other

things that he might have done? In other words, is he harboring a lot of guilt about his failure to bring those people out? How do you think he feels about what happened to him?

MS: Well, it's hard for me to describe exactly how Roger might feel. Also, I wouldn't want to breach any confidentiality that exists in the relationship that I have with him. But I know that one very powerful thing that's happened and that I've heard time and time again from many people is second-guessing, thinking back about their experiences in the flood. Thinking back about what they could have done that would have been different or thinking back about wishing, I guess in some instances, that they could repeat that experience, so that they could do it differently. So, that they could have perhaps helped someone or saved a life or somehow done something differently. Of course, that's a common feature in most disasters, is feeling that somewhat of a sense of helplessness. A sense that was I able to do all that I could have done under those circumstances? Many people have, after looking back at their experiences, have come to the realization that they really have done or they really did do all that they could do during that time. I think those people that have had that realization probably have made some of the more healthy adjustments to their recovery from the disaster experience. I think that there's probably a lot of other people that are still having to deal with that second-guessing and still having to reach that decision.

MK: Almost thinking if you go through it long enough, you could bring that lost one back. I've gone through that trap myself of thinking and rethinking and rethinking things as though to reverse something that's already happened.

MS: Right. Yes. That's a –

MK: That's an endless cycle once it starts.

MS: Yes. Yes, it is. There's really –

MK: How do things look generally to you for people in the Northfork area? Do you think that in six months everybody's going to pretty well have pulled out of this? What kinds of scars are there going to be?

MS: It's very difficult for me to make any predictions about people's recovery. My involvement is only in a very small part of the county, only in a small part of the whole Northfork area. So, I can't really speak for the whole area, but I have seen people make progress in – I guess not only have I seen a great deal of physical change and progress. Each time I go over there, I see changes. I see improvements. I see the streams being channelized. I see debris and trees being removed from the streams. I see bridges being built. I see government trailers in the county and people repairing their homes. I think all these things have importance. These are visible signs that the recovery process is occurring. Of course, it's a lot easier to build a bridge and to channelize a stream than it often is to get over severe emotional trauma. But there's resiliency that I've seen in the people of Pendleton County. I think that resiliency is a part of human nature. But I've just seen it expressed so vividly in Pendleton County, the strength of character that these people have to have suffered, in many instances, such great losses and yet to recover and to pick up their lives and to rebuild and to go on. I see that with each visit that I make to Pendleton

County. I see a greater strength of character and a strong determination to go on with life regardless of what it brings their way.

MK: Is this human nature at work, or is there something special about the culture of Pendleton County that enables people to establish new values about what's important? Is there a spiritual side of people that's unique to Pendleton County?

MS: Well, along the way, I guess I've tended to lose some perspective. I really see the people of Pendleton County, particularly of that Northfork area, as being very special people, as I mentioned earlier, very proud, and very independent people. People that have not been used to a lot of affluence have always had to struggle to exist. People that aren't strangers to struggle and strangers to –

MK: Hardship.

MS: Yes. I'm kind of getting to a place where I'm doing a little bit of blocking. We could either –

MK: Don't worry about it. We can piece things together. It's all right.

MS: I guess this is the magic of editing. I'm trying to edit in my mind, which is not always the easiest thing to do. [laughter] But –

MK: Just let it spill.

MS: Yes.

MK: So, you were saying people have had more experience with the struggle and hardship to survive.

MS: I think they have because a lot of these people are people that lived on small farms and lived in rural areas where gardening was more than a hobby. Gardening was a way of providing your food for the coming year. Maybe raising a few hogs in the backyard or having a few cows. But because there isn't any industry, particularly in the Northfork area of Pendleton County, people have had to just struggle just to kind of scrape to get by. I think it's contributed to the character that they have. I've heard people talk about that character for a long time in Pendleton County. I had observed it before, but never as powerfully as right after the flood and during the flood recovery efforts where people were able to somehow accept their material losses and realize that there was some type of spiritual side to life that had importance. Although they had lost a lot of possessions in many instances, they still had their own lives or the lives of their family members or the lives of their friends in the community. This was, for many people, a very important realization, that those things that had been washed away could be replaced, but that human life is not as easy to replace. Even the people that lost friends and family members somehow seemed to be able to be going through a process of accepting the loss of those people in some way that seems to indicate to them that there was some reason or purpose for the flood and the losses that were incurred in the flood. That seems to be a real common theme that seems

to come up time and time again. That probably nothing could have prevented it and nothing could have changed it, that it seemed to be God's will, and it seemed to be unavoidable. Even with that is an amount of acceptance that goes along with that, that even though the losses was great, that it can be accepted.

MK: Contrast that with the cynicism of the greater society. I mean, I've never heard anybody yet call this a senseless tragedy. Yet that's how it might be described if it had hit New York or a place with more sophistication and perhaps more cynicism. I think you're right. People do see a purpose and a plan at work. It may not be a kind plan to them, but it's a plan anyway. They've got a role in it to play out. For that reason, perhaps it isn't so alienating.

MS: Part of that might come from just their closeness. They've lived closer to nature perhaps because they're in a rural environment. They've lived closer to the cycles of nature. They've seen the effects of snow. They've seen the effects of flooding. They perhaps have an appreciation for the cycles of natures, and even natural disaster that perhaps people living in a more urban or technological or sophisticated culture might not have.

MK: There are lessons, it seems to me, for the rest of the country (with the response?) to us who's been here.

MS: Yes. Lots of lessons and I think there are lessons that are still being learned. This thing is far from over. As we're sitting here, who knows how long this recovery effort is going to be taking place. We may be sitting here a year from now, two years from now and finding that people are still going through this recovery process.

MK: But however long it takes.

MS: [laughter] However long it takes. Right.

[end of transcript]