

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings

Martha Sponangle Oral History

Date of Interview: December 19, 1985

Location: Tucker County, West Virginia

Length of Interview: 00:18:30

Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline

Transcriber: NCC

Michael Kline: What did you see when you woke up the next morning?

Martha Sponangle: Well, from where we live, we had to go over across the bridge to the other part of town. We couldn't get over the bridge because the other end of the bridge was gone. There's a railroad bridge that goes to Hinchcliff. That was Tuesday morning, the water was still up, and we couldn't get to the bridge. So, we walked over to Hinchcliff. In Tuesday afternoon, the water dropped then we were going to Hinchcliff. The state police came, they wanted my husband to go with him with his truck to Red Creek. That's where they found the one body that they found. So, he went with them, and then he came back.

MK: What was the story about that?

MS: It was the person that was missing from Jenningson, and there was a body. Well, I am assuming that that's who it was. I don't think it's ever been identified, but that's who they thought it was. That body was in a tree, and they got that body out. Then Wednesday –

MK: It was in a tree.

MS: Yes.

MK: How far up the tree?

MS: I don't know.

MK: You don't know the details.

MS: Yes. I only know that the body was in a tree, and the police and the sheriff deputies got the body out. Then Wednesday, we walked across the railroad bridge, over into town, and my sister-in-law, niece – we had a lot of friends loose, those things, house.

MK: What happened at the school? The school didn't reopen right away, did it?

MS: No. I came down on Thursday after – they repaired the bridge Wednesday night. So, we got our vehicles out Wednesday or Thursday morning. Then I came back to the school. I checked in, like Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Then Monday, I came down and we worked here.

MK: What did you do here? What was happening at the school?

MS: Well, we had the food in, then we worked in the gym, setting the food up and giving the food out to people. A couple of the teachers did the survey to see the homes that were destroyed, the homes that were lost, unload the trucks with water and food.

MK: Did people stay here at the school?

MS: The first two or three nights, but they were placed with families.

MK: How many stayed here?

MS: I'm not sure. I think they were maybe two or three families.

MK: What is your sense of the impact of this thing on the school children you saved? How long were they out, was it about three weeks?

MS: Our last day was November the 4th, we went back the 21st. So, they were out two weeks, a little over two weeks.

MK: Did you see any of the kids during that time?

MS: A few.

MK: What was your impression of how they had reacted to this?

MS: The children that I've been around, I don't see any difference because their parents handled it very well.

MK: What did you mean?

MS: I don't think you'll see much difference in the children, because their parents handled their situation very well. They didn't panic, they're not depressed. If they are, they don't show it around the children. The children – they're still taking the children to Sunday school in church. I don't and I didn't see any difference in the children.

MK: That's since I came back, is that same thing true?

MS: I don't see any difference. They don't seem any different to me. The atmosphere at school is very – it's a good atmosphere. The children feel at home here. They feel if they have a problem, that someone will help them with it. So, I can't see that there's been any big change in the children.

MK: No depression or anything?

MS: I haven't seen any depression.

MK: Have you heard the teachers talking about anything?

MS: Well, they talked to the children the first day and let the children talk about their experiences, but it's not something that you dwell on. They went on with their schoolwork and back to a normal way of life, but I haven't seen that much depression. The people that really aren't the ones that anyone can get down in the dumps. Mostly you sit around, talk about it, and cheer them up is the big thing I think, if you can keep everyone cheered up. As far as the children, I don't think there's been that big of a change.

MK: What's it going to take to rebuild this community?

MS: A lot of elbow crews, the – wanting to have a better community, wanting to come back here. Most people, this is their home. They won't go anywhere else. You know, they will rebuild. I feel that it will be a better place because of the flood.

MK: That's what I was asking. How do you mean?

MS: I think people's attitudes have changed. It will have to be built back better. Let's face it, the three communities were becoming run down. I think that you'll see an improvement.

MK: How did the attitudes change, though, particularly?

MS: Some attitudes haven't changed at all.

MK: But some have?

MS: Others have, concerning material things. A lot of people don't think material things are worth a lot anymore. They say, well, "The more you have, the more you have to lose." But I don't think people's attitudes changed that much.

MK: Has it been a good spirit in the community?

MS: I think there have been.

MK: About helping each other and all.

MS: The ones I've talked to, but the ones that we usually talk to, usually are up people anyway. You have a few down people, but most of them are up and they want things back better.

MK: Have you picked up on any of the experiences that people are having with the agencies that are involved in that flood relief, FEMA, and Red Cross, and the others?

MS: Not Red Cross, not the Salvation Army. FEMA, you get the impression that when you go to ask them something, they don't know what they're doing. They don't know what they're talking about, people ask them a question, it's like, "Well, I don't know." If they don't know, then they shouldn't be here. If they can't give them the answers, then they better go do them. But that's – most people say, I ask them a question, they say I don't know what to tell you.

MK: So, people haven't found it to be a real response.

MS: Well, I think they've been responsive enough, but they don't have the answers. But does anyone have all the answers. You're talking major disaster, unexpected.

MK: Is there anything, any other stories about what people went through that you can

remember?

MS: I think there was a lot of laughter, it was at my house, about little things that happened.

MK: Like what?

MS: Oh, the mannequin standing in the hole out to Tucker County Bank with blue jeans on that someone propped up. Everyone got a kick out of that. You can always find something to laugh about. There's laughter in even tragedy. You have to find laughter, and as long as you're laughing, you're not crying. I didn't see too many criers mostly.

MK: Do you think people in West Virginia are especially well equipped to deal with something like this? Say, better than people in other places were.

MS: I think there's a spirit about people that live in the mountains, I think there's a lot of pride. A lot of people had too much pride to take blankets and food at first, they didn't want it. They didn't want people giving them, not that they didn't appreciate it. It was like, if you want to give me something, give me a couple meal and then help me shovel mud. When they saw that they did need the food, the extra food, which they did, for a while. But it was more or less, give me a little help, and I'll help myself, which I think's better.

MK: You think that's a spirit that's very prominent here in West Virginia? Or do you think other places have that too?

MS: I think anywhere that you're faced with a disaster, you're going to have that spirit with some people. Because those are the leaders, those are the ones that pull the other people through. There's always that spirit. But West Virginians have had a rough time anyway. If you spend five days a week on icy roads in January, you get a little tough in snow. But I think that in the long run, things will be better than what they were.

MK: That's great to hear.

MS: I have enough faith to think that it will be better, what has to be better. Someone has to make it better. The only people that can do that are the ones that are living here. My niece called from Maryland and asked, "What do you need now?" I said, well, think about some grass seed and flower seed for spring, because people, they're going to need grass seed. If we can scatter a few flowers here and there, that helps.

MK: Thank you very much.

MS: You're welcome.

[end of transcript]