

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Denise Thompson Oral History
Date of Interview: March 19, 1986
Location: Tucker County, West Virginia
Length of Interview: 01:03:48
Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Denise Thompson: Pardon me?

Michael Kline: What is the date today?

DT: The 19th, March 19th.

MK: Just a few days past St Patrick's Day.

DT: Yes.

MK: What is your full name?

DT: Denise (Ann?) Thompson.

MK: Your maiden name is?

DT: George.

MK: Denise Ann George Thompson.

DT: Yes.

MK: Who was your people?

DT: My mother was a Knotts. She has lots of relatives around. My father didn't – doesn't have many relatives around here. His mother's passed away.

MK: Was he born here?

DT: [affirmative], in Dry Fork.

MK: Your mother too?

DT: She was born, yes, Sugarland. Yes, they're both from Tucker County.

MK: I've heard them talking about the Knotts up in Sugarland.

DT: Yes.

MK: The Phillips.

DT: She's not really a Phillip, Knotts and (Maunicks?) You know her? Her mother was a Knott. Mom was a Davis. I get all confused [laughter]. She married a Davis. Her family, all the Knotts and Maunicks, most of them, are related.

MK: Did you grow up in a big family of kids?

DT: Just three sisters.

MK: Just three?

DT: Yes.

MK: That's pretty good.

DT: Yes, that's true.

MK: Not compared to some I hear.

DT: Not compared to my mother's family. They had seven brothers and sisters [laughter].

MK: I interviewed the Brocks, the people of Pennsylvania, and she's got fourteen kids.

DT: Yes, that's a big family. Three doesn't seem so big compared to fourteen.

MK: So, you grew up –

DT: In Parsons.

MK: Right in Parsons.

DT: Yes.

MK: Where did you meet him?

DT: [laughter] Well, we knew each other in school. Then after he graduated, my aunt kind of fixed us up [laughter].

MK: Well, he said [inaudible].

DT: Yes. I guess he's not too bad.

MK: You've got two boys.

DT: Yes.

Male Speaker: One's asleep, and one's awake.

DT: Yes. One's never asleep.

MS: That's me.

DT: That's right.

MK: So, how had you been getting along before the flood came?

DT: Oh, pretty good.

MK: You were living –

DT: In the sheriff's residence, yes.

MK: Sheriff's residence right by the jail?

DT: Yes. Cooking for the prisoners when it wasn't too bad then.

MK: You were cooking for the prisoners?

DT: Yes.

MK: Three meals a day?

DT: Yes, breakfast, lunch, and supper.

MK: How long did you do that?

DT: Since January, we had moved in in January. I had done it. It wasn't too bad, though, not unless it was full. It was only full once or twice, and that was bad. You got up in the morning. You had to fix eight – breakfast for eight [laughter].

MK: Amazing.

DT: But when it was two or three, it wasn't bad.

MK: You were getting complaints about your cooking?

DT: No [laughter]. They all liked it. I guess they were afraid to complain, or it would get worse.

MK: Well, what do you remember about November 4th?

DT: Oh, Jiminy.

MK: It had been raining a lot.

DT: Yes, it had. It had been raining for – I know the exterminator came that day. He said if it rained much more, it would float his house away [laughter]. I don't know if it did. I don't know where he lived. But that's what he said. I don't know. I don't know what to tell you. I don't

remember too awful much [laughter].

MK: It's about his mother, I guess.

DT: Yes, and came back, and the fire was so blue when he left. He called and said he was stuck up there. I don't know why I didn't realize and leave at that time. But I guess I just thought they're in the middle of town. It would never get there. But it did.

MK: What did he say?

DT: He said that he was stranded in that house, that he couldn't get out, that the water had come up, and they couldn't get those old people out. I guess I didn't realize that it was that high. I just assumed that they were older people, and they couldn't get them out. I guess I thought that. I don't know why I didn't react to get myself out of there with my kids. But I didn't. But I went up and told the dispatchers. They told me that they knew and was trying to get help up there. But they were so busy that I didn't stay and talk. You know, I just went up and told them. I didn't bother them any longer because they were really busy. But they didn't even tell me that it was flooding that bad. So, I went back downstairs and kept watching the water rise in the basement.

MK: Did Hank call again?

DT: No. He only called me once. I got lots of phone calls from his mom and them wanting to know how the water was and stuff. As a matter of fact, the phone had rung right before they came to get me. It was about the parking meters, and I knew I couldn't get out there [laughter], by myself anyway. But if I haven't even been going up and down the street, out in front, and just wave at me, I didn't think anything was wrong. Of course, they didn't either, I don't guess. I didn't – you know, they didn't realize it was going to be that bad right there in town. Going just a little bit, they went back to get me.

MK: Who came in to get you then?

DT: Johnny Lambert, and what's his name? Bob?

MK: Bo Haddix.

DT: Bo Haddix, yes. He's a little (meanie?), I guess. Yes, he took (Brian?) out.

MS: Then he took Justin.

DT: Now, honey, I'm not sure who came and got Justin. They called him Bill, but I don't know. I don't know who he was.

MK: It was up pretty deep then?

DT: Yes. It was up to my chest.

MK: You walked out yourself?

DT: Yes. Johnny Lambert carried the baby as high as he could, up like this, and I held on as much as I could. I thought I was going to float away that one time. I told him, I said, "If I let go, you just go on with my baby. Get him out of here." That current was awful strong and so cold. Oh, it was cold. I had on sweatpants and canvas shoes. I lost my shoes, the water, trying to pick your foot up, and be so strong. Brian rode on both shoulders. He didn't get wet. Justin, his blanket got a little bit wet on the bottom, but he didn't get through to him.

MS: My shoe got wet. But it didn't hurt because it was so hard.

MK: So, how far did you have to walk around?

DT: From the bottom of the steps in the residence, doesn't seem very far, but it seemed like 2, 3 miles out. To the edge of the sidewalk, up, I don't know, 20 feet, Hank? 30 feet? I don't know.

Hank Thompson: [inaudible]

DT: Well, it wasn't deep after you got there – you know where the alley runs in between there? There is where it got lower. It seemed like it was chest height from the edge of this – foot of the steps there at the residence, clear out, and then up probably about that great big pole. Wasn't very far if you get down there and look at now. But that night in that deep water, it seemed like I was never going to get out of there.

HT: She had gone back upstairs, from what they told me, before she left, to see if they got me up.

DT: Yes. I did that before they came. I went back upstairs, and I waited. I think it was two hours. I think it was at 9:00. I went up, and I asked them if they had heard from him. They said, "No, we don't have any contact with him up there."

MK: That's all they said?

DT: Yes [laughter].

MK: What did you think?

DT: I thought, oh, no, Hank's down – [inaudible] down in Cheat Lake. Of course, I guess they didn't know anything else.

MK: But you realize that things couldn't be good.

DT: Yes. Because I thought, my heavens, with their radios and stuff, why don't they know? Then that night at the gym, when no one came around, no Gary, no Joe, no Keith, none of the officers were there, none of them, none of them came around; I kept thinking, oh, my heaven, what's happened out there? No one could be alive if none of them had been around. Because I

was there, and the sheriff's wife was there. None of them had been around.

MK: You were where?

DT: Out at the at the gym, is where they took me.

MK: At the school?

DT: [affirmative]

MK: [inaudible] set up.

DT: Yes.

MK: Can you describe what that was like?

DT: Oh, that was awful. It wasn't too bad when we went. The lady gave me some dry clothes. I didn't sleep any, but the baby didn't wake up at all. I took him in and laid him down after carrying out in that cold water. They took him in there and laid him down. He didn't wake up at all. He had been asleep in his bed, and I picked him up and wrapped him up. But they carried him out. I carried him in that truck or whatever it was, sitting on the edge of a little old thing, and he didn't wake up at all. Took him in there and laid him down. He didn't wake up. Ryan finally went to sleep. The next morning, no one knew anything. Finally, at daylight, some kids, the Smith kids, 15 or 16 – I mean, they're not kids but you know – walked to town. They came back and said Tannery Row was gone, and this was gone, and that was gone. I was thinking, oh no. They wouldn't let you leave. They kept saying, "No, you can't leave. You can't leave." As people were sitting out there and talking about this being gone, that being gone; I'm sitting, thinking, where's Hank? Why are these people talking about their car being gone? I don't even know where my husband is. So, finally, I left. I decided I'd walk up to the Corporal (Zeiler's?) house. It's just – that was Monkey Hollow. You know, you can come out the school there and just go up. You don't have to come to town. You can just go up the other street there. So, I thought, well, they'll let me go up there. They said they wouldn't let you in town. I thought, well, they'll let me go there. You know, I won't even just go across the street here. I got stopped by some lady that used to babysit. She saw me walking, and it started to rain again. She made me come in her house. There was where I was when Hank finally found me. Never so happy to see anybody. I wouldn't want to do that again for anything. I told him if the waters come up anymore, he can go help people, but he has to stay on this side of the bridge [laughter].

HT: That's what she told me [inaudible] last week when the water came up. We thought it was going to flood again. We were going to start evacuating Hendricks and Hampton. I think the last word she told me was, "Stay away from [inaudible]."

DT: Yes. It's bad news by the bridge. Lots of people that live in Hendrickson, Hamilton [inaudible]. I tell you that not knowing is what was, you know – and when it got to be about 11:00 and still no one had come around, I kept thinking, oh, no. You know, people say that's gone. What was it like? Now, this was 10:00 when they took me. I thought, oh, my heavens, if

Hank was stranded at 7:00, what – he has to be gone. I didn't realize until then that it was that bad. I don't know why. I guess the person just doesn't think that it could be that bad. But it was, and I tell you.

MK: So, you felt kind of trapped in the school. They wouldn't let you leave the school.

DT: Yes, I did. I don't know why. Because they were nice. You know, they had cereal that they offered us for breakfast and things, but I don't know. I'm not much of a people person. When I get upset and they – I didn't know any of the people really, you know? I mean, I knew who some of them were by name, but to know them – and as I said, you know, I couldn't get over none of them were around. None of the other officers were around to ask, where was Hank? I had seen – who did I see? Somebody in the ambulance. I had asked them, and they didn't know. No one knew anything. I knew who I'd ask, some of the firemen that night when they took me out. The fellows that took me out, I had asked them if they had heard anything. No, they didn't know anything either.

MK: There was no telephones.

DT: Well, people could call me. As I said, Hank's family had called me, and the troopers. The corporal's wife had called me right before they came. But I guess up in Hendricks, there wasn't.

HT: No. Because when I talked to her the last time on the phone, the water was – hit me right about the knees in the downstairs of the house. Then the phones just went dead. That's when we went upstairs now.

DT: But I had taken candles upstairs, just before they came. Because I knew when I saw – when I realized out the window that it was hitting the parking meters. I thought, no way I can get out of here by myself and carry – take two kids. Brian, he couldn't walk. I had to carry both of them. So, I had taken candles upstairs.

MK: You seem like an awful, cheerful person. Did you keep that going on?

DT: No [laughter]. I came to grips with it pretty good, I guess. It's either smile or cry.

MK: But you really thought the worst before –

DT: Yes, I did when – it was about 10:00 or 11:00. I just thought he was doomed. I mean, when I got up to that lady's house, it was probably 11:00.

MK: In the morning.

DT: I couldn't even – they asked me where he was, and I couldn't even say. I just looked at them and bawled.

MK: So, what time was it when he finally got back?

HT: It was right around –

DT: It was about 1:30, 2:00.

HT: 2:00, 2:30, somewhere around there.

MK: It must have been terrible.

DT: Yes. I was. I tell you; I never knew what it was like to think someone was gone. I mean, my father died, and I knew what it was like to have someone die. But I just had never experienced anything like that before, to just not know, know that things were that bad and know that he'd been trapped since 7:00, way before Parsons ever got bad and just not know. No one could tell you. This day and age, with all the computers and telephones and all the equipment, and no one could get from Parsons to Hendricks to find out if he was all right.

MK: Have you had a lot of thoughts about it since then?

DT: Oh, sometimes. I try not to think about too much.

MK: Do you dream about it all?

DT: No. No, I don't dream. I never dream though. I never dream. But I've never had any dreams about it. I think about it once in a while and get upset. But I just try to thank God that he's alright. The past is the past. You have to go on.

HT: – for like, a month or so after the flood, especially when I was living with my mom, and my mom and I don't get along at all. I've caught myself snapping off at her, snapping off the kids. I know that that had something to do with – I feel it then. Because I was trying to find a place to live and trying to do my job and just one thing right after the other one. I would actually – I'd find myself snapping off my wife and my kids. I had no reason to do it. I know it was to do with the flood. Because I just had all that pressure, man, I'm just [inaudible] out. [inaudible] to the wrong people.

MK: But you never felt that way, particularly.

DT: No. I mean, I would lose my temper and think – it would bother me, like he said, be snappy or – but I didn't get depressed or anything like that.

MK: You were just quiet.

DT: Yes. There's too many things in life to let something like that put you down. I've got two little kids that they both could have been easily stepped away that night, and I'm just thankful that they weren't. We're all alright.

MK: Yes, it was a fantastic experience. What's happened around the community since the flood? Do you think the flood brought people closer together?

DT: I think in some ways it did. They all sort of pulled together and helped whoever needed help and things. It's starting to shape up now. People are getting things back kind of the way they were. I think once it gets spring and things – a few things get green, and things, it'll help some of that mud get dried up. Today, you could look out, and that wind would blow. You could just see a sheet of mud blow, I mean, just walls of dirt blowing around.

MK: It's been the longest winter I can ever remember.

HT: It is.

MK: Well, that's great.

[end of transcript]