

Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Hank Thompson, Jim Blosser, Bryan King, Michael Parsons Oral History
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Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Michael Kline: January 29th. What is your full name?

James Blosser: James W. Blosser, Jr.

MS: What's the W for?

JB: Willard.

MK: Willard?

JB: Yes.

MK: Who is your mother and dad?

JB: They live over at Elkins. Kathleen and Willard, Sr.

MK: Did they always live there?

JB: No. We used to live at Kearns. I was born and raised at Kearns.

MK: What did your dad do?

JB: He worked at the railroad. Elkins there, retired.

MK: Well, I bet he's got some stories.

JB: Yes. Quite a few of them, different ones.

MK: Did you ever work on the railroad then?

JB: No. Never did.

MK: What have you mostly done?

JB: I worked for A&P, drove truck, tractor, and trailer. Manage a grocery store right now.

MK: Were you the manager over there?

JB: No. Of another store up here at Thomas.

MK: What do you remember about November 4th?

JB: Kind of a rainy day. Pretty rainy.

MK: It's been raining a long time, hasn't it?

JB: A good while. It had. Earlier that afternoon, we went up Pleasant. We just kind of made it out of there, getting back out of there that evening. When we came back down, they said they needed help up at Hendricks. So, we went to Hendricks to try to help out that evening to see what was going on up there with them. Got up to Hendricks, and the water was really getting high. There were some houses there that we weren't sure whether there was anybody in them or not. So, we started to check out a few of them to make sure. We got up to Hibbs's house, and him and her was in there, me and Hank Thompson. After we got there, there was four others come, too. Once we got there, we couldn't get back out. Water just rose so fast that there was no way possible that you could get back out. We just had to spend our time right there. That's what we did. We prayed to the good Lord that he'd see us through the night. The man did.

MK: What do you mean the water rose so fast? It's a little hard to imagine that.

JB: Well, we waded through the water. I had on a pair of hip boots like. It was almost over the top of them when we were wading up to it. It just came up so much faster after that and so swift that there was no way possible that anybody could walk in it or try to get out of it. It was just too fast, too swift. It kept rising. It was really rising fast. We even tried to get a rope and tried to throw it across. But about the time the rope got across, there comes a rooftop or a building top or something. It caught the rope and took everything with it. If there had been somebody on it, it would have killed them really. But the water just came up so much faster. Never seen it rise that fast the way it was. It was Hank, Danny Booth, Danny Hibbs, Danny's boy, Daniel, and his son-in-law. I can't think of his name now. I can't think of it.

MK: (Lipscomb?).

JB: Yes, Lipscomb. I can't think of his name. Mr. and Mrs. Hibbs there, we spent the night there in their house.

MK: What was that like?

JB: Kind of a frightening night. Never had anything like that happen to me before. I hope nothing like that ever happens again. It'll be something that I'll never forget. Maybe if I ever get in water, again the situation might come back to a person and make him stop and think really about the night that he did get caught in the water if he was ever – get in water again situation. It's hard to say. If nobody was there, if he wasn't in any water or any place or anything for anybody and stuff, it's kind of hard to tell somebody what kind of a night you spent or anything unless you know the situation, you know different things. But anybody that was in the water, I can feel for them. Know what the feeling was for them, though we weren't in the water. We were in a house, but we weren't sure about the house, how long it would be there. Because all we could do is just kind of watch the water come up the stair steps. We just kept watching it come up the steps and wasn't sure whether it was going to come on up the rest of the way. When it washed part of the house away, it really gave us a feeling. Because right underneath where we were at to start with, there wasn't too much left of it under there. When the water took it away, something hit it. We're not sure what, but something did hit it and knocked about all third of it away of the house underneath us probably, somewhere in that neighborhood. Then we all went back to the back bedroom, kind of huddled together and prayed together. One boy, I'm glad he

was there with us. He really made a difference for us. He's a good boy. He goes to church. He was able to pray for us. We asked him to pray for us. We were all standing together, huddled together, holding hands. Because we didn't think there would be very much time left because you could feel the house rocking or more or less shaking. You could hear the stuff hitting it. You didn't know what time the good Lord was calling, whether it was going to be now or later or when. But we figured just any time. We more or less just got together and held hands and prayed. Trying to give ourselves a little boost to see if it wouldn't help us to where he would save us, take care of us that night. The good Lord did.

Hank Thompson: Like I said today, I'm glad Danny was there because I know Danny was a good boy. But I had back-slid from church and things like that (until I was raised?). But the first thing that really impressed me that night, as scared as everybody was, Danny Hibbs asked me, he said, "Are you saved?" I said I was, but I back-slept. He said, "Do you want to pray?" At that time, I knew that death was knocking. I figured, well, if I'm going to die, maybe we can make things right with the good Lord. Danny and I went to a room by ourselves and prayed. After that, it was just such a calm feeling to sort of come over me. I remember walking into a room where Jim was knelt down looking out the window. Jim looked me right in the eyes, and he said, "Dear God," he said, "be with us here tonight." That's when we really all got together and started asking the good Lord to take care of us. I honestly feel if it hadn't been for Danny Hibbs that night that there's a possibility we all would have died. Because the boy made us see the light. These fellows here, being as young as they are and junior firemen, they've done a lot that night. It impressed me, I mean, as far as being 16, 17 years old, to risk their self when they know that they've got a bright life ahead to help us. I don't think I told either one of them, but I'll tell them right now that I appreciate them. I know I see Jim out right here on the street, and I see him still going to church.

JB: Still going.

HT: Still going, both of us are. I don't ever intend to slide back away like I did at one time. Because I just can't put into words the feeling that I had that night in that house.

MK: When did it look like all hope was lost to you?

JB: What did it look like?

MK: When did it look like all hope was lost?

JB: I can't remember about what time it would have been, but it was earlier that evening after we went up the steps and when the water kept coming and when you could see different things go floating by out there. Just about anything you wanted to see, you could see going floating by. When it was moving, it really had the power behind it. Then after part of the house washed away, really I didn't think there was much hope for us. It was just one of those situations when it takes part of it downstairs, and there's nowhere to go. After we'd prayed together, we more or less all were standing there. We decided then that we could just look for the house to break up about any time. Everybody decided that if something does happen, everybody just try to save themselves. Because there's no way that you would be able to try to save somebody else with the

waters, the way they were. We did all agree that when something does go, you just try to save yourself. Because there's no other way that you could try to save somebody else.

MK: Are you a good swimmer?

JB: No, not really. Well, I can swim, but I don't classify myself a real good swimmer. A real good swimmer, I wouldn't lay any bets on them in that kind of water. You had just as good a chance not swimming as anything else because you couldn't fight the current. There was a lot of current. The road in front of the house looked like a river. The river was back over a thousand yards or better. That's where the river was at.

HT: We were right probably less than a quarter mile below where the Dry Fork and the Blackwater Rivers come together. We were right in the middle of both of them. Like I said today, I can't put into words how I felt that night. But as far as being with people that I was with that night, I couldn't ask anybody. I couldn't ask to be with any better people than I was that night. I mean, we all realized what was going to happen. I can distinctly remember the water. I didn't get concerned until the water started coming into the house. When we were downstairs, Jim and I both were trying to get the phone to work. It would work. Then it would go out. Then it would work. Then it would go out. I finally got through to my wife. I told her, I said, "Listen, you want to go upstairs and tell them we're up here. Get us some help or we're going to die." I know it was at 12:30 that night when we realized that we were trapped. There's no possible way of getting out. No possible way of anybody getting into us. But I asked Danny Booth. I said, "Danny," I said, "what are we going to do?" Danny just more or less looked at me. He said, "We're not going to make it." He said, "We're going to die." That's the most distinct thing I can remember because I looked at my watch. I remember looking at my watch. Then when the backside of the house went and there was nothing underneath us, except the floor between the two rooms where we were, upstairs and downstairs. I knew Jim probably better than any of the rest of them was up there. But before the night was over, I believe we knew everybody's life history was in the house.

JB: I think so.

HT: It was remarkable to how we all stuck together, to how we all accepted the fact that we were going to die. There was nobody fought to why he was going to die or anything like that. It was just like everybody knew that he was going to die, and he had accepted the fact that he was going to die. There was just nothing we could do about it. But we sat there. As the night progressed, which was the slowest night that I have ever spent or lived through, we laid down on the floor. We decided, well, we'll try to get some sleep. About the time you get your eyes closed, you could feel the house shift. You could hear a big tree slamming into the house, just creaking, cracking, glass breaking. I think at one time, probably about 4:00 a.m., I dozed off to sleep. I woke up, and I thought, "Wow, I've been asleep for about three or four hours." I looked at the clock, and I've been asleep about ten minutes. But I couldn't sleep. But the next morning, when we did go out, I think a lot of us – even now, I go home. I lie down on the bed. I just get this feeling, the river around me, I'm terrified of the water. But it's just something we're going to have to hold our heads up and just keep right on with it.

MK: As a result of praying, did you feel this sense of calm come over you, such as Hank described?

JB: Yes, I did. It was just me and Danny had prayed together because he asked me if I'd been saved. I told him I hadn't been going to church and stuff. I asked him to pray with me, and we did. Everybody, more or less, just had a calm feeling all night long. Because it was just something you didn't know what to expect or what was going to happen any time. It was just something nobody was sure of.

HT: The feeling I had after the first time with Danny, I'm not the kind of guy that I can just go up to someone and say, "Let's pray" or anything like that. Well, I am now. I feel that I am now. The feeling that I had after the first time that Danny and I prayed was just like, I was cold. We were all wet. I just had a warm sensation come over my body. I could feel myself calming down. I mean, I could actually feel myself calming down. I could actually think to myself now we got to do here what we got to do. We're just going to have to try. If this house goes, there's nothing we can do about it, and it's going to happen. But yes, I had a feeling. I think we all did in that house that night. The two guys across the street from us, there was some praying going on in that house, too.

JB: We kept trying to holler at them to see how they were getting along over there, two junior firemen. But with the noise from the water and stuff, it was kind of hard at times to hear. We did have flashlights, had a couple of flashlights that we could use to shine back and forth across over at them and to the people up on the road up there that was trying to get to us. But there was no way possible for anybody to get into us. It was just no way.

HT: The last time I talked to the dispatcher, she informed us that help was on the way. Of course, our anxiety was building up so much to get out of there that anything that we heard outside or a motor running, we were convinced that they were there to get us out. We're going to be all right. During the night, there were a couple of times that I was really let down. I know at one time, someone even said, "I hear a helicopter." You remember that, Jim?

JB: I think so.

HT: I was so excited. I went to the window, and there was nothing. It's just more like someone hitting you right between the eyes. There is nothing out here. We heard shots, which we found out later was these two fellows here signaling to us. But we thought they were outside to get us. It was such a disappointment to when we went to the window, when we heard the shots, and all we've seen was these guys. They're in the same position that we're in. There's no one there to help us.

Bryan King: What about when that inloader got buried?

HT: When it first came in, we were all excited, "Hey, they're coming to get us out of here. We're going to make it." Then the next thing I know, they got hung up in a big hole, and they couldn't get into us. It's just like, wow. [laughter] It's just bam. It just numbs you. You just can't describe the letdown that you had.

MK: One by one, you see the possibilities fading away?

HT: Yes, yes. There's nothing we can do about it.

JB: It really gives us some relief, though, when we did hear that motor running on that big loader.

HT: Yes.

JB: It kind of perks you up, makes you feel a little bit better that you know somebody's trying to do something for you anyhow. One bad thing about it, a lot of people didn't know where we were at. If something would have happened that night, they wouldn't have no idea who was in that house because it wasn't told who was in the house.

HT: The information that –

JB: It didn't get out.

HT: – they've given the rescue parties were at – I think they knew you two were over there. But they had no idea that Jim and I and six other guys was in the house right directly across the street from them.

JB: There's no words.

HT: Because I remember the next morning when they finally did get us out, people said, "Were you over there, too?"

MK: They thought these two guys were in your house?

HT: Yes.

JB: Yes.

HT: But they had no idea that there were separate parties in separate houses. They had no idea that there were eight guys –

JB: Thought it was one house.

HT: – in one house. If something would have happened to us, we would have just been listed as MIA. [laughter]

JB: Missing.

HT: No one knew where we were, which I couldn't believe that either. Because I talked to the dispatcher on a couple different occasions and I told her where we were at. With the

communications problem, they didn't know we were there. They had no idea we were there. My wife knew where I was.

JB: Just like the other boys, nobody had any idea where they were at. The other four either.

MK: Tell me your name again.

BK: It's Bryan King.

MK: Bryan King.

BK: Yes.

MK: What happened to you that afternoon?

BK: Well, we were up in the school. It was raining hard up on the mountain. Then when we were coming home on the bus, it was just raining hard like it was. It's been raining every day, nothing different. Then I heard the fire whistle go off, and I went over to James Vance's house. He's another junior fireman. He was already down there. His mom said they were taking out the files in Dr. Pete's basement and all and taking it upstairs, so it wouldn't get all wet. I heard it go off again. I was walking out to another friend's house. I've seen Roger Murphy. I've seen him getting in his truck, and I asked him if he was going downtown. He said yes. I asked him if he would give me a ride to the fire hall. I went down to the fire hall. I guess it was about, what, 7:00? 6:00, 7:00.

JB: Yes. Around 6:00.

BK: Michael was down there, and the chief was down there. He said we were in the flood stage now. We got on our bumper gear and all. We got back in Jim Propst's truck, and he took us out to Hendricks. Then we went from there. We were just getting people out of the houses. It wasn't really that deep then. I think it was, who was it, Propst said that there were some people trapped down there.

Michael Parsons: When we first got there, when I first got to Hendricks, me and a couple other firemen got in a boat. We were going to try to go over and get them. But anyhow, we started out in the boat and had those little high rim boats with the ten-horsepower motor. Just wasn't hard to get it in that water. We got down there and knocked a hole in the bottom of the boat. We got the motor tangled up in wire and everything else. We dragged the boat back up out of there. We all got in again and were going to try it again. The thing sank right there. So, I don't know who the order came from or anything. But all I know is that me and Brian were told to get down there and tell Hank and Jim – or they didn't even know Hank and Jim were down there. But they told us to get down there and tell whoever was in that house that we were going to try to get a boat into them. So, me and Brian took a rope. We just held on to each other basically. We went down through there. When we got over there and we heard all these guys hollering, they told us to try to get a rope across to them. So, we were across the street from them, which it really wasn't bad on the street. It wasn't really bad at the time. But it was about 6 feet deep in the

middle of the road right now at the time. We tied the rope onto one of the posts on the front porch of the house. I started to cross the thing. I had hip waders on, which weren't doing much good because the water was up to about right there, everywhere. I started to cross it with the rope and got sucked into the water and pulled myself back up. Brian was helping me pull. I think it was Hank that was over there. He had a rope. They tried to throw it across. As soon as it hit the water, it was gone. We didn't have a chance to catch it. So, we pulled our rope. Me and Brian pulled our rope back up. I threw it across to Hank. Hank got it and tied it onto something over there. It was just holding onto it or something. About that time, a rooftop came down the middle of the street and took the rope, jerked the post off the porch, took whatever they had tied to, took everything, and threw it down this river.

BK: They threw them down.

MP: Hank then told us to go into that house and see if the phone still worked. So, I took a board and broke through the front door. We went in to see if the phone worked. It was dead. So, we went back out onto the porch. They told us to go back and tell them to bring a chopper in. But they couldn't have brought a chopper in because the weather was too bad. But we started back across. The water came in all this big onrush. We were standing on the front porch when we got there. It was about up to our knees. We went out after trying to look at the phone, and it was about up to our chest on the front porch of that house. So, we started trying to get back, and there was no way we could. So, we went into the house, and we went upstairs. That's basically where we spent the night.

BK: Yes. When we went in the house, it was only about 2 feet deep of water in the front floor at first.

MP: By the time we got back outside, it was clear up, almost over your head right in the house. That's how fast it rose.

BK: They just took out all the windows and just threw everything around the house, on the couch.

MP: It ripped the front porch off of that house and ripped the whole back wall and lower story off the house. The next morning when we all got out, both foundations on both houses were completely gone. We went through about the same thing they did. That house shifted all night and stuff banging into it. But our house wasn't in bad shape as theirs because as far as structure because they were in an older house. But all I know about what he's talking about is when he says that you can feel it shift. Because we found a little pistol and we fired some shots. Because we didn't know whether they knew we were there or not.

BK: We put all those candles in the window.

MP: We found all these candles.

BK: Anything we could do to signal them. Then every little bit, we'd go down and check the stairs and see how much water had come up the stairs.

MP: It got within about 1.5 feet of the top story of the house. It was a two-story house. If it came up anymore, we were just going to have to go to the attic of that house.

HT: Well, that's the only way that we had to measure the water where we were at. Jim can verify it. After the one room where we had all huddled up, there was a bed there. We sat on the bed. The part of it underneath us was gone. It just happened so fast. We heard the glass break, and the house shifted. I remember Danny Booth saying, "The house is gone." He yelled, "The house is gone. Get to the other room." We all went to the other room. We sat there and nothing happened. But you could just feel the house moving. You could hear the glass breaking. Then we were afraid to go into the other room because we didn't know what was underneath us. We did go back into that room, but we'd only go one or two people at a time. Then when we couldn't see how high the water was getting, that's when we started measuring the steps. I know the water was on the thirteenth step. At about 1:30, 2:00, the water started going down. We got relieved. Then it started coming up again. We're right back where we started. I think finally about 3:30, quarter to 4:00, the water started to recede. [laughter] But about every ten or fifteen minutes, we were out there checking the steps to see where the water was.

MK: How do you explain the water coming up so fast like it did right then?

MP: I guess just the banks washed out, and both rivers hit about the same time. Either that or one river was bad, then the other one broke through at the time. I don't know why it did.

MK: What do you mean broke through?

MP: Because everything that was holding it back, washed out, the banks and stuff. I don't know.

BK: It did come up fast though. It seemed like every five minutes, it was up another foot.

JB: The Dry Fork came up first. It really had the power behind it. At first, it was Dry Fork. I'd say it was up first. When the water went down at one time, we noticed it going down the step because it went down at least a step or a step and a half, somewhere in that neighborhood during the night. Then it started rising again. The only thing I can figure, I've heard different stories, it said Black Fork started to rise. It started coming up more then. That brought the water back up to a higher level. Because where we were at, there was nothing in front of us. There was a little building that the man had out in front of his house. But it washed away sometime during the night that we couldn't see. But other than that, we didn't have any protection at all, only a few trees that stood up above us. One was a pretty good tree. I reckon it helped divert some of the stuff away from us. Because we just heard some of the big trees or anything be washing into the houses at any time.

HT: It was just like continuous. Every second, you're thinking, what's hitting the house? The house is moving again. Just all night long, you're thinking this stuff, all night long. We could actually hear the limbs scraping on the side of the house as it went by.

MK: But you could hear the same thing?

BK: Yes. Every second, you heard something different. You look out the window. You're on the second floor. You see the water just floating right beside you. You'd see a tree go by first and then a house. You just hear everything go by.

HT: Cars.

JB: Camper tops.

MK: Did you guys have the same feeling that you were going to die?

BK: Yes. We were scared and all. We prayed and everything. We asked the Lord to forgive our sins and all. Then finally, it just got to the point where we said if we go, we go. Just stays here, it stays here. There's nothing we can do now.

MP: I didn't sleep at all that night. Brian, I watched him. He slept for about, I'd say, between fifteen and twenty minutes the whole night. I didn't sleep at all. I was just lying –

BK: When you wake up, you feel like you slept the whole night.

MP: I was laying there, and I was watching over there. Daylight came. About that time, I heard them guys yelling. Me and Brian had all of our bunker gear off and stuff because it was so cold. We had blankets wrapped around us. I heard them yelling, so I went to the window. They said they were going to try to come over and get us, they thought, because the water was going down. It was supposed to go up between 18 and 20 feet deep in the road between the two houses, the house we were in and the house they were in, washed all that out, just like a canal. If somebody would have tried to come over on that road and we got across that night, I don't believe they would have made it.

HT: Just like I said, Danny Hibbs, I honestly feel if it hadn't been for Danny Hibbs, I would have been stupid that night. I would have tried. Because I had made up my mind at one point on the back side of the house, I had gone – I don't know if I told Jim or not. But I said, "Jim," I said, "we've got to get out of here." I said, "We've got to get out of here." That's how bad I was wanting to get out of there. I was to the point where I was ready to start to cross. But they said, "Well, no." They said, "You're going to go out there and die quicker than you might here." Like I said, we all finally accepted the fact that we were going to die. We just had to wait for it to happen. I'm a firm believer that the only thing that helped them was that home was there that night with us ten people. I will never forget.

MK: Say it again.

HT: I will never forget the feeling that if I was on my deathbed, the feeling I had after I prayed the first time that night, it was like a warming, calm sensation. I could actually feel myself calming down. I'm nervous, and I'm shaking. I could just feel myself quitting then. At that time, I could just feel myself quitting then. I got a hold of myself. I just thought to myself,

"Well, I'm going to die. There's nothing I can do about it. We've done everything we can do. It's in the Lord's hands." It was. The Lord kept them homes there that night. There's nothing that will ever convince me that that's not what kept us there that night. If the Lord ever heard ten people praying, he heard it that night.

MP: When an inloader came, it lowered down. It was about 6 feet deep in the bottom of the house. We went downstairs. I swung over to the door. I busted the door out. I was standing in the doorway because I thought they were coming to get us. Hank or Jim or somebody hollered over and told us to get back upstairs. They got hung up. We went upstairs. We didn't have any lights. So, we had a fire department spotlight, but he left it on some porch up there in the middle of Hendricks.

BK: I'm going to watch that house float away that it was on.

MP: Anyway, the only thing we had, we found some candles of whoever, the family's house that we were in. We found a Coleman lantern of theirs. That's the only light we had all night. But the guy had a rifle. He had one shell for his rifle. That's the only one we could find. We fired that. We fired everything, all the shells in that little pistol because we didn't even know whether they knew we were there or not. They said they heard us in the middle of the night, I'd say about 1:00 or 2:00. They had on one of the fire department trucks. With the PA, they told us to stay put. We were going to have to wait it out. I yelled over and told them that. They didn't know whether they could have heard it. But they were over there all night. They stayed with us.

HT: If I had somebody walk up to me on the street and say – well, I've had them walk up to me on the street and say, "I'm sure Jim has, too." They'll say, "Well, you all had a bad night up there that night." The only thing that I can actually tell them people and be honest with them is I just look at them in the face, and I say, "You have no idea of what kind of night that me and nine other people had up there unless you were there." I still cannot sit down and describe in words the feelings I had that night in that house. I just can't do it. I don't know if anyone else has had problems with it. I've had problems with it. I told you today. I can go home. I'll wake up in the middle of the night thinking, I hear a roaring of the river. I'm scared of the water. I'm deathly scared of the water now. I know even after a couple weeks after it was over with – and Danny Hibbs, I've talked to him. We were all sitting around, me and the sheriff and some other officers were sitting around the conservation officer's home one night. One of them looked at me, and he said, "Well, I heard you got some religion while you were up there." I looked at him and smiled. Before somebody would ask me that, I would just laugh it off. But I was dead serious. I looked the man in the face, and I told him, I said, "Yes." That's the only thing that got us through that ordeal that night. I could write a book on how I feel about the Lord for saving us that night. I just don't know how to describe it in words to anybody else. I know Jim had the same feeling that night. Jim and I have been to a lot of fires. Both of us have been injured fighting fires. We spent time in the hospital fighting fires. But nothing can describe what we went through that night. The Lord was there.

MK: I feel like you have a new friend.

HT: Oh, buddy. You better believe it. [laughter] There was a little old sandbar that we can

stand on the next morning. I looked at Jim, and tears ran down Jim's face. I was teary-eyed, too. We were just so happy that we were there together and that we made it. We could see people on the other side waving at us. I just wanted to hug Jim for being there with me that night, and Danny. Like I said, after we prayed, then I got this sensational feeling over my body that what's going to happen is going to happen. There's nothing we can do about it. It was amazing. Like I said, if I was ever in that position again, I don't think there's any other people that I could have spent that terrifying night with to be any better and be any more spiritual and faithful towards each other and try to help each other in the position that we were in than these fellows right here. If one of these guys was stranded out in the middle of the river somewhere and I was the only one there to go to him, I'd go to him. I would try because we all tried that night. I know I've got three good friends sitting right here. I've known Jim a lot longer than I've known these guys. I've been through a lot, but I've never been through nothing like that. Like I said today, it was a bad experience. But I can look back on it and see the good parts of it. It's brought me closer to my family. It's made me realize things, things that I've lost. If I hadn't had them, I wouldn't have lost them. I really didn't need them. It's brought me closer to the Lord. I'm sure, as Jim, it's brought him and I closer together.

JB: It sure has.

MK: What were the lessons you learned from it?

BK: Well, when you got out of there, you really thought about how great life was. You've never really seen it before. But then when you're in the face of death and you live through it, you think it's great. Because we're both young, I didn't want to die. I had a lot of years I wanted to live and things I wanted to do.

HT: That's the thing that I was thinking about the night in the house. I was thinking, man, I've got a wife and two kids at home. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. But yet again, it was eating at me that I was going to die. I accepted the fact that I was going to die. But like he said, you get out in the morning. I think of my job. Man, I've got problems. I've got a (court?) and all this stuff going on. But those little problems are nothing to what we had that night. We've seen our way through it. If there's a way to get through that with some prayers and the good Lord's help, we can make it through life. On a scale of one to ten, bringing me closer to people and being more faithful, I'm about a ten plus. I know I told Jim that morning. [laughter] I said, "Are we going to church Sunday?" He said, "Yes, buddy." Sunday morning, I went to church in uniform. I parked my Cruiser right in front of the church, and I went in. That's probably the first time I've been to church in a couple years. I think more or less that I wanted people to know. People in the church told my mother, "Boy, your son had a bad night." But I got up in that church. I testified in front of about two hundred people. I told them, "The only thing that saved us was the good Lord that night." It was just like a revival. I know that the Lord has a purpose for us people. We just have to find out what it is. It's amazing what prayer will do.

MP: When our fire whistle went off, I was at the house. Because we, junior firemen, we don't have monitors and stuff. I do now, but we didn't have them. When the fire whistle went off, I went out and jumped in the truck and took off because you don't ever know what it's going to be when you don't have a monitor to know. Anyway, we went down there. I got my bunker gear

and stuff. We got in the van, and we went down to Dr. Pete's office. I was down there. We hauled all these records up. At the time, in front of the post office, I had my hip waders on. I could walk here across the street and not even get wet. We carried all these records up and went back to the fire hall. The chief said it was a flood stage. He called Elkins and told him it was a flood stage. I was there listening to him at the time. They told him that they didn't understand why we were at flood stage because we didn't even have a flood watch out, that we weren't even supposed to be flooding. But the chief said we're at flood stage. We didn't have any trucks because all of our fire trucks were stranded someplace. So, me and Brian got in the truck with Jim Propst in the back of his grocery store truck. We took off for Hendricks. We started going door to door getting people out. I had people up on the top street. I'd go to their house. They'd turn off their lights and act like they weren't home. There was nothing I could do about it. I'd go to the next house. But anyhow, we ended up down there. Then something that really crushed me was next morning, you didn't know whether they knew you were out there the whole night. Next morning, we got out and looked out the window. There was the whole entire county standing over there on the bank waiting on you, watching. They had five or six people come over to get us. They rode from house to house and pulled the pole with ropes to go over and get us. It was my dad and Brian's dad and Fuzz Walmsley and our assistant fire chief, Charlie Lloyd, and Fuzz Walmsley. They all come. Ralph Helmick from Hendricks, he's a member of the fire department, or he used to be. They'd come across there with ropes and got us. We'd all go back across there by his weight and all this, giving us blankets and everything. It was just a good feeling that they were there all night hoping for you and praying.

HT: Well, I know there was one fireman that sat on railroad tracks all night in his truck. That was Earl Davis. He sat there all night in his truck and was watching our house. I'd take my light about every half hour or so. I'd signal him. He'd signal me back just to let him know that we were still there and things like that. But he sat there all night long. At the crack of dawn, when it got daylight, Jim was in there. We felt a little better then because the water was going down. We got a chance to get out of here. I've been in this fire department ten years. Well, about nine or ten years. There's guys that sometimes you don't associate with, you don't talk to, unless you're out on the fire or something like that. But I don't think there was a fireman that wasn't waiting for us up there when we got out that morning. I mean, Sam Bosser, another one of the firemen, he's seen me. He grabbed me and Jim, and the tears rolled. That goes to show me that we've got a good bunch of guys up here. We're just like one big family.

MK: Had your people given you up?

BK: Yes.

MP: They had told our parents and his wife and Hank's wife and everybody that day there wasn't any hope for us because they thought we were gone.

BK: Yes. They thought we drowned.

MP: My mom and dad spent the whole night over there on the bank, so did all my mom and dad's friends and everybody. Brian's mom and dad spent the night over there on the bank. But they told my mom and dad that there was no hope, that they thought we were gone. They spent

the whole night thinking that. His wife did, too. That's what they told her. I had people for a week after that calling. I had people coming in from Thomas and Davis to look for us because they thought we were gone. It took a long time for the news to get out that we were all right.

MK: People were dragged in the river.

MP: Yes.

BK: Yes. People see you and say, "Oh, you're alive." They start (ignoring?) you and everything.

MP: Yes. People from Thomas and Davis, from around there, that there was no phones down here, so nobody knew unless they'd come down. I had people come to the house that thought I was gone. I'd answer the door. They'd be so happy to see me because they thought we all were gone.

HT: You think that little children don't understand. Like my oldest son, he's four and a half. My wife, she went up the steps to the dispatch office in the house. She asked. Our dispatcher just looked at her and shook her head and said, "There's no hope." With them words, my little boy just went berserk. My wife said he repeated, "My daddy's dead. My daddy's dead. The water got him." I can't express how glad I was when I got out of there that morning just to know that my family was all right. Because when I got back to my house and I've seen the devastation there, and I knew that everything was gone. Everything that I'd ever worked for, everything that I still owed on was gone. But still I can look at my family and say, "Well, they spent a night thinking I was dead. But I'm alive, and I'm still with them." It brings everybody closer together. It's just a sense of humanity that's there to people that's your friends. I'm sitting here with tears running down my face. It's not tears of sorrow. It's tears of joy to know that God let me live that night up there and to still be with my family and to have my wife and my two little boys. I'm sure Jim will tell you the same thing. I've lost everything I've got, but I'm the happiest man there are. I can walk down the street. I'll look at these guys, sit on the bench, drunk twenty-four hours a day. They've got more than what I've got right now. But yet I've still got my family together, and I've got a new life to live. All I've got to do is hold my head up and live it.

MK: I feel like you had some kind of a rebirth or something.

HT: Oh, yes, yes. From the time that we got on our hands and knees up there, and we prayed, from the instant we got up, from that point on, I felt like a new person. I'm sure Jim did, too. Because it was just a feeling that came over my body that just calmed me down. That's why I'm telling you the good Lord was there. As far as coping with it from now on, it's just something we've got to live with. There's no use looking back at it and saying, "Well, if I'd have done this, if I'd have done that," we'd have done all we could do. Life goes on. You just hold your head up and keep right on living. I know Mrs. Hibbs, we got her as comfortable as we could. We talked to her. Believe it or not, the lady went to sleep, and she slept most of the night. Mr. Hibbs was so kind. I don't know how to say it. He showed us that he was one of the most friendly people. I mean, we'd be standing there talking. He would look at me, and he'd say, "God's going to take care of us." This man is probably in his seventies. I know his wife was seventy-seven.

JB: He's in his seventies.

BK: Yes.

HT: It amazes me. Here I am, 25 years old. Here's a man that's over fifty years older than I am. Probably in worse health conditions than I ever will be facing or whatever. He handled it. That really impressed me about Mr. Hibbs that night. He was scared the same as the rest of us. But then he kept saying, "Well, God's going to take care of us." I know his wife, she was more or less an (invalid?) kind of a person. If she'd go to the restroom or something, we'd all leave out of the room. So, he could take her to the restroom or something like that. He was right here telling me, he says, "Now, mama, it's going to be all right. God's going to take care of us." He told her that dozens of times that night. She would say, "What's going on?" I don't think she actually knew what was going on that night.

JB: I don't think so either. He more or less said, "Mom, don't worry." He said, "Just a little bit of water downstairs. Everything's going to be all right."

HT: "Don't worry about it, mom. God is going to take care of us."

JB: Really and truly, you never heard a word out of that woman all night long. She'd lie back down and go to sleep. She slept just about all night. A few times there, she had to get up. But other than that, she slept real night. Well, he said there one time, he said, "Well," he says, "I feel for you, boys," more or less. He says, "The good Lord's been good to me and my wife." He says, "We've more or less lived our years out." But he says, "I think the good Lord will take care of us."

MP: The thing that hit us was we were up there; we didn't know any place else was as bad as what we were.

BK: Yes.

HT: Yes.

MP: When they got us out of there, then we drove up on Blackman Flats. Everybody told me that my truck got washed away. I said, "I don't care, heck with it." That's the only thing dad said. He said, "We'll get another one. That doesn't matter." None of us realized that the whole county, the lower half of the county was like that, that the Parsons got washed away and everything else. But for about two weeks after that, I never really got back to Hendricks. All of my friends in the fire department, they patrolled Hendricks for a week and a half. I came to Parsons and stayed at the fire department.

BK: When we came out, we said we were never going back.

MP: Yes. [laughter] When we stayed at the fire hall, I went back to Hendricks about two and a half weeks after the flood, driving the fire truck because I had to make some announcements on

the PA to the people that got hit. That was the first time I was back to Hendricks. All my friends were up there in Hendricks, driving around on patrol with the fire truck. I stayed down at Parsons because I wasn't going back.

HT: There was not a day that has gone by, I'm sitting in the office or I'm out working, I haven't thought about that night. There's not a day that has gone by.

MP: There were thirteen weeks, I think, today.

HT: Yes. There is not a day that goes by – I think about it. I even went to bed at night and thought about it. I'll tell you something else to myself for a couple weeks after the flood. We were lying on the floor up there. We just had blankets that we all huddled together and tried to stay warm. Like I said, all you could hear was the roaring water and the trees crashing into the house. The glass are breaking. But I went home, and I thought, "God, how good it is just to lie in your own bed, and you don't have to hear that." I was tired. But like I said, after we prayed up there, it was just like I just freshly got out of bed. I was fine. I wasn't tired. I don't know if it was anxiety or what it was but just words can't express it.

MK: Who was waiting for you? Who was looking for you all night?

JB: Well, really, they didn't know where I was at. My family didn't. They had no idea where I was that night.

MK: (Who was gone?)

JB: They just knew I was gone at the far house. But my wife – I live up on Quality Hill – and she really didn't realize what was going on the whole night. She wasn't downtown. Nobody had said anything to her. She really didn't realize it until the next day that half the town had washed away, and all this water and stuff was really happening because nobody said anything to her. My son, he was out. He was trying to get to me. I didn't realize it. He didn't realize I was in the house that night up at Hendricks. But he was up there with the farm and trying to help them out. I'm glad he didn't realize I was in the house because he'd have probably lost his life trying to get to me. I didn't know he was out there, which would have given me a different feeling. To know one of your families is trying to get to you or something that would give you a different feeling at times. Especially if you think they're losing your life, you might do something different than normal really that way.

HT: That's what I think the big thing with me was. Because having two young kids, I'm worried about my wife and my kids. Plus, when I talked to my wife, I think it was the last time on the phone, she said that the water was up on the sidewalks here. I knew as bad as Hendricks was, Parsons is bound to be getting some water. I kept worrying about my wife. Well, my wife, she's got such love for me that she stayed around and checked to see how I was all night long, and she ended up trapped herself. Like I said, Bo Haddix went and carried my 4.5-year-old son out. As a police officer, Bo Haddix was probably one of the (honoriest?) kids there are in this county. [laughter] But God loved him, gave the kid a chance. He risked his life to save my wife and my two little boys. Again, you go back to where your children are, you think, well, your children

don't realize what goes on. My wife said when they took her to the shelter out here that night, my youngest one, he was only, I think, three-and-a-half months old at the time, four. That my 4.5-year-old sat up by the baby all night long with a blanket wrapped around him wet. He kept saying, "Mommy, I'm not going to sleep. I'm going to watch Justin. I've got to take care of my brother." To me, that impresses me because there's no doubt in my mind that God was with him, too.

MP: People called my mom about all evening. She said people had scanners and stuff that had been hearing what's going on. She said that they had been acting like they weren't telling her something the whole evening because they'd been talking on a scanner, saying that me and Brian were gone and stuff. So, dad wanted to know where I was. Because at the time, this was about, I'd say, 7:00 or 7:30. My dad went down to the fire department downtown. This was before the bridge washed out and everything. He went down there. This was at the time they were messing with the boats, trying to get them to do anything there. Chief told dad that they had boats up there, but they didn't have nobody how to run them. Well, my dad is one of the most avid fishermen in the round. He's got his own boat. He knows how to run them. He's good. So, he told Chief that he would go up and run one if they had boats up there that would handle it. So, Chief gave dad a fire department jacket. Dad is not in the fire department or anything, so dad came up. When dad got up there, they told dad I was gone. Dad sat up all night, made himself sick worrying.

HT: It just does something to you knowing that you're there, and you can't get to your family. Like I said, I lost everything I had, but I still got my family. I still got my life. From November 4th and 5th on until however long I live, I'm going to try to make the best out of life. Because twenty-five years of my life flashed in front of me that night, what I could have been, what I could have had, what I didn't need. There it was. I'm going to die. I'm going to lose it all. I'm going to tell you something, fellows. Not no more because I live every day the best I can do it. The only person I have to satisfy is myself and the good Lord. That's what I'm going to try to do. I don't know, maybe Jim, being through a religious experience like that. I've had people out here on the street say, "You guys are just lucky." I said, "Well, we prayed about it. The Lord was with us." I've had people say, "You actually believe that?" It just blows me off my feet. Because I know and I know Jim knows that the Lord was with us that night. There was just something there. The experiences I had earlier in life and with this, it just put it altogether. It showed me that the Lord works in mysterious ways. I've even come to the point where I thought, well, maybe the Lord done this, had this foot to make people realize what can happen, bring people closer together. It has. It has brought me closer together in all aspects of life to everybody. Even my worst enemies, I try to talk, too. Everybody has a purpose. You've just got to find out what it is.

BK: What really impressed me is when we came out that next morning, you've seen all those people standing up there. Many of them, they lost their homes and their jobs. They just stood out there to make sure we were okay. Then weeks after the flood, people come up to you. They hug you and all. They said they prayed for you the whole night. They're just glad to see you alive.

MK: If this was to happen, say, in New York or New Jersey or somewhere like that, do you

think people are the same everywhere, or do you think there's something special about people in West Virginia that showed that night?

BK: Well, here in Parsons and all, everybody is a lot closer than in a big city or something. It wouldn't really have mattered to them as much. Here, everybody's close, and everybody knows everybody.

HT: After I got back in that morning, I realized after my wife and I – and I did get a halfway decent night's sleep. I had the baby I got to take care of. I went out to the school. People come up to me crying, hugged me, and "We're glad you're all right." That impresses me to think, well, these people care. I also believe that this flood, this disaster here in Parsons, even in West Virginia, has brought people closer together. I've even read in the newspapers. I try to read every article about the flood they are, that people even out of state has realized how close the people are now here. You read articles that we were in Parsons-Tucker County this week where the devastation of the flood was. You see people that's lost everything they ever lived for, and they're out here helping somebody else. I don't honestly think that you can go through the United States of America and find too many places that's like this town right here in this county. I really don't.

MP: It changed a lot of people, too.

HT: You're right. I'm one of them. [laughter]

MP: I know Brian has, too. Me and Brian had people come up to us and hug us that normally never give us the time of day. It really hits you a little bit strange. Tell us that they were glad that everybody was all right. They cried for us and prayed for us.

BK: Seeing people all pitch in and helping some other family out. People lived on the Flats and up on Colorado Hill that didn't get hit. The next day, you see them down there walking around in the mud and water and all that, helping other people salvage what they could and all.

HT: I think Jim would even admit to this. We went up Pleasant that night. We had a fifth of Lord Calvert. We were nipping on it. We had to get on a truck in a couple places in Pleasant and move debris out of the road, so we could get through them. We kept saying to each other, "We don't have to worry about it. We've got the Lord with us," holding up the Lord Calvert bottle. After his flood, I got to thinking about that. I said, "If I only knew what was going to happen, would I've ever done that?" I have asked God to forgive me. I don't know how many times for that. We did. We got the Lord with us.

JB: Yes. We did. We really did.

HT: We don't have to worry about it. Here, we have a bottle of Lord Calvert, but yet the Lord really was with us that night.

JB: We didn't realize how much.

[laughter]

HT: You're right.

JB: Just saying it earlier that evening by using the bottle, I get to say it with how much the Lord was really with us that night.

HT: Like I said, it has totally changed me as a person. I look at that now. I thought, "Man, that was awful." I'm here holding up a bottle of Lord Calvert, thinking, hey, the Lord was with me. We don't have nothing to worry about. The Lord is with us. But the real Lord was with us that night.

JB: Yes. He was.

HT: The real Lord was with us that night. I even thought about that in that house [inaudible]. I said, "Man, look how I was talking about the good Lord." Here he is protecting me even though I've done that.

JB: Saving –

HT: I was ashamed to tell that, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. It turned out to be a good experience and learned [inaudible] less than one. People think, "Well, that's funny." Well, I look back on it. It wasn't too funny at the time. I thought even up there at that house during 4:00 a.m., here, I was drinking a bottle of Lord Calvert a while ago joking that the Lord was with me. I don't have nothing to worry about. My buddy and I really (need him?). When you get on your knees and you start to pray and you start to remember and stuff like that, hey, buddy, it gives you a funny feeling. There again, I think, "Well, maybe the Lord done this to me." Maybe he's punished me for that. It's done something to me. I don't ever intend to do stupid stuff like that again.

JB: No way.

HT: There's no way.

JB: I don't know. It just kind of makes you regret and really feel sorry for what you've really done.

HT: That's a true story.

JB: It really is.

HT: That's a true story. We went up to Pleasant that night. There's guys with us. We had Mountain Dew and a bottle of Lord Calvert.

[laughter]

The Lord is with us. We don't have nothing to worry about.

JB: We even took a nip or two coming back down. Because we got out and move stuff out of the road, so we could get out in the pickup. We couldn't get through.

HT: But little did we realize –

BK: [inaudible] [laughter]

HT: – the real Lord was with us that night.

MP: We needed her.

HT: I just can't sit down and say how thankful I am. I could worship the Lord from now on and give him everything I got. I still would be able to thank the good Lord above for what he has done for us at night. Because I owe everything I got to him. That's the way I feel about it because he spared me my fight that night. I'm sure Jim will say that the Lord's hand was on that house. We get out on the street, and there's four houses left. You think, "Hey, there we were. We were in one of them." I mean, the Lord was with us.

BK: They've just been [inaudible] the house using the ghettos [inaudible].

HT: I've been around guys that's been nipping on Lord Calvert. Every time I see a liquor bottle, I think about that. I really do. It's sort of got a mental thing to me in my mind when I've done that.

[end of transcript]