Tucker County, West Virginia Flood Audio Recordings
Susan Schmitt Oral History
Date of Interview: February 24, 1986
Location: Tucker County, West Virginia
Length of Interview: 01:03:36
Interviewer: MK – Michael Kline
Transcriber: NCC

Susan Schmitt: Susan Ann Schmitt.

Michael Kline: N is for?

SS: Ann.

MK: Oh, Ann. Where were you born?

SS: I was born in Blue Island, Illinois, suburb of Chicago.

MK: Wow. I'm going to Chicago in a couple of weeks. I'll tell you about that.

SS: What are you going to do? [laughter]

MK: I don't know a whole lot about you. But I know that you have been a doctor and a practicing doctor in Africa; is that right?

SS: [affirmative]

MK: Was that through the Peace Corps?

SS: No. It was very interesting. We were going to go to South America through the Peace Corps, but decided they didn't give sufficient training. So, we put ourselves through a program in Liverpool, a Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. While we were in England, we got notified that they were not placing physicians, which turned out not to be true, but instead went on to Africa on our own. It took us five months to get across Africa. We wanted to go to Tanzania. Then it took us three months in Tanzania to get a job. We were recruited as transnationals by the Canadian equivalent of the Peace Corps, which is the Canadian University Services Overseas. So, half of our salary came from the Tanzanian government and half came from the Canadians.

MK: Did you work in a rural situation there?

SS: [affirmative] Looked a lot like here. It was red clay like Virginia, but mountains like here are even steeper, cold, rainy, very different from the rest of Tanzania, for instance. It was the first mountain chain from the Indian Ocean. So, we got all the rain. It didn't snow. But it got down in the forties. I had beautiful cauliflower and marigolds and broccoli and no cabbage, butterflies, or moths at all. So, it was great. It was great. But it was very (rural?).

MK: Were there other parallels to this besides the way it looked.

SS: I think the most amazing thing that I found there were the family structure, the closeness of the families. In some ways it was similar, in some ways, it contrasted differently from the United States as a whole in terms of extended family. There was no child abuse. Children were precious. There was always some place for you to go if you didn't want to be with your kids. When grandpa was ready to go home, six men would show up with a litter to carry him home,

even if his village was twenty miles away. There were no nursing home placements. That was very different I think in terms of – it was a shock to come back to this country and to see old people that didn't have any place to go or kids that had been abused. I think they didn't have very much there. But they gave their families what they had. That was because people always say, "What was it like? Was it good? Was it bad?" It was very good, and it was very bad. I think they had some things that we have lost. They certainly did not have a lot of what we had. But it was a very intense, very interesting experience, never saw kids die before, other than trauma or leukemia or whatever. I lost a child a week on the Pete's ward, at least a child a week to many of them are preventable diseases, measles, pneumonia, whooping cough, things that we don't see here. I get very incensed when someone starts telling me about how they don't want their kids to have immunizations, I guess because of that experience. Because I saw so many kids die of what is a preventable disease. I've seen epidemics when we were in England, there was a whooping cough epidemic. So, I'm not real tolerant.

MK: When you when you came back from England, did you come here?

SS: When we came back from Africa, we went back to Jackson County, where we had our farm. When we did our internship in seventy-five, we decided that we didn't want to do a big block of time and training. We wanted to practice. We didn't want to stay in training for a long time. So, we did an internship and then worked seven months in an emergency room to get enough money to go overseas. Because we had to support ourselves while we were travelling and looking for a job. When we came back, we had our farm. We wanted to do more training. So, we did four more years on a shared basis in Charleston at CAMC doing the family practice residency. So, we came back to Jackson County where we had our home and then came up here two years ago.

MK: Did you practice in Jackson County?

SS: Most of the time we were in training. We did a year's internship, the time in the emergency room practicing – essentially, I did the same thing in the emergency room. I did an ambulatory care program. We did off of the emergency room. So, it was family practice. But it was in a hospital setting. Then when we came back again, it was four years of residency. So, it was practicing, but it was in training, mostly in hospital, half time in the clinic, half time in the hospital the last two years.

MK: So, you came here in –

SS: March of eighty-four.

MK: What did you find here?

SS: What did we find here?

MK: What was Tucker County?

SS: What was Tucker County? We – I speak "we" because I think we pretty much agreed on what we were looking for. We knew we didn't want to be in Charleston or around Charleston,

didn't want to be in the city. The area we lived in Jackson County was very rural. But it was very depressing. People would break into each other's cellars and steal food. It was not the area that we wanted it to be in terms of families and community support. So, we looked around West Virginia for a place where we felt we could stay. We traveled through the Cranberry and through Marlinton and up through Dolly Sods, in different areas. We really like Tucker County. We like the area around Blackwater Falls. We like this area. We originally were looking in Franklin, which we also liked. The July before we were going to be finished, they really didn't need another physician in Franklin at that time. This position was open. But we came up two years before that to visit the doctors who were here, who were in the middle of a big struggle with the board. It was in the middle of a snowstorm. We were not real impressed in St. George. But then we came back in July. It was real different. We talked to the board members. They were pretty flexible about what we wanted to do and decided to come to Tucker County. I like this area. It's very different from communities even close by. Most of the people that we see don't have much money, but they're real hard working. People have been really good to us. I think partly, because we've come in as physicians, partly because we have been into farming and have done some things that they can relate to. We've been trying to reclaim our farm. They see the fencing going up. They see us trying to get back some of the land that has turned into forest. I think people respect that probably as much as – maybe more. But I like this area. It's beautiful. Every day, when I drive to work along that stream, I just think of so many people getting to spend two weeks a year in a place like this and I get to live here all the time. I like it.

MK: Are there any kinds of health problems that are peculiar to a place like this?

SS: As opposed to the rest of West Virginia or as opposed to those stuff?

MK: Yes. That are somehow related to the terrain or related to people living in isolation, relative isolation, or I don't know what I'm trying to say.

SS: Sure.

MK: Is there a lot of alcoholism here because people are lonely, for example, because the mountains are barriers to having a more active social life?

SS: There's a lot of alcoholism. I don't know if that has anything to do with, specifically this area. It's interesting in that it tends to get translated into people either not drinking at all or drinking too much. Very few people here – in terms of patients that I see – drink socially. People either don't drink at all or they drink way too much. Probably the people who don't drink at all have so many in their family who drink way too much. So, there certainly is a lot of it. In some ways, I don't see the things that I saw in the city because of the extended family. Grandma may not always be right, but at least she's reassuring. Much of the emergency room visits that I saw in the city were young mothers who didn't know what to do with a cold, with a fever, with a runny nose. They really didn't know what was serious and what wasn't. You don't see as much of that here. Because usually, either mom or grandma or somebody in the family has some sense of what's going on. See, a lot of hypertension – I see mostly gynecology. That's probably the biggest thing I see because I'm a woman. I'm the only woman for many counties around. So, I see people from far away even for their gynecology. Next to that, I think the major diagnosis we

see is hypertension. The Appalachian diet probably has more than its share of salt. Because I think the American diet's pretty high. But it's real high here.

MK: We were talking about hypertension, for a high-salt diet.

SS: Hypertension – no, fried, salty food. I guess I grew up in a traditional Midwestern family where you have meat, potatoes, salad, and vegetables. When I came here, people had thirty things at every meal, and they were all fried. I never heard of fried onions or fried tomatoes or fried everything.

MK: A full salt cellar and table –

SS: Yes.

MK: – on top of that.

SS: Or else fried and bacon greases. I've never had that before either. Although my dad used to spread cold bacon grease on bread. That was a real German trip. But I see a lot of hypertension. I see a lot of different things. I'm not sure if there's anything special in terms of being isolated. I think probably more – not so much physical problems as some – of the mental things. Because I'm a woman, I see a lot of women. A lot of women confide in me when they come for their care about what's going on in at home because I always ask them. I think that's very difficult. They are very isolated. They don't always have the support. They may or may not have family close by, since most women tend to move where their spouses are from. So, they're often with their in-laws and not with their parents. I don't know if it's the time of year or what's the moon or whatever, but just a lot of women come and talk about what's going on in their family. I think the traditional family values are breaking down and people aren't sure what to substitute in its place. I think because women have been the disadvantaged parties in many cases, they want change. Their husbands are resistant to change. Sometimes, most husbands around here do nothing at home because it's women's work. But yet many of their spouses are now going out to work. There's a big change in terms of the family, women being burdened with outside work plus the housework because husband won't help. I'm sure that feminism will eventually come to West Virginia. I'm amazed the sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds that I see are not the sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds I saw ten years ago, even in Tucker County. So, even though we have a high pregnancy rate and a lot of different changes. Things are changing. The other thing that amazes me here is the level of sexual activity in teenagers. Because there is nothing else to do and that's what people do. I would guesstimate, probably 80, 90 percent of the high school are sexually active. So, we're seeing some of the venereal diseases that are on the rise in other places. We're seeing a lot of them in Tucker County. Unfortunately, there's not the education to back up contraception and such. We see a lot of teenagers who get pregnant. So, I'm hoping to make an impact on that at some point. I keep a low profile. Because I think people know where they can get contraception. I think the best thing to do is for me to keep the lowest profile possible, because word of mouth is how teenagers search out their contraception.

MK: You don’t want to get mauled, tied up in that pro-life –

SS: I don't want to put anything on the front page of the Parsons Advocate in terms of what I'm doing. It's a political problem. Because they won't give me a family planning contract even though they know that I do a good job. That I do the cheerleader exams. Then I see people. There's some politics with the health department. The state is not willing to give me family planning. So, I've had to do everything on my own. I've had to get an independent contract with Rocky Mountains Planned Parenthood. I write-off a lot of the Paps that I do. I found someone in the state lab of Hygiene who will do my Pap smears for free. But it's all undercover. It's not state funded.

MK: It's probably how they wanted you to do it.

SS: Well, I've even had to twist some arms to do that. It's very frustrating. I'm trying to attack that problem as aggressively as I can without losing what I've gotten so far. But that's kind of where I'm at politically in terms of Tucker County is with respect to reproductive freedom and such.

MK: It's not enough to know medicine. You have to know how to administer.

SS: Right. I think that's a big part of it. I think there are a lot of yo-hos who know their drugs but aren't effective practitioners. I think it's sort of like in rules for radicals. I think if you want to change things, and that means getting a crew cut and wearing a three-piece suit, that's what you do if you're truly a radical. If you want to wear long hair and alienate people, I mean, that has its own place. I think it was easier for us to come into this community because we followed two physicians who were relatively radical in terms of their appearance and such. Therefore, Woody had a beard and Woody wore blue jeans to work, and we seem so much more conservative even though we're not. It's made it easier.

MK: Yes. Appearances are real important.

SS: [affirmative] I'll wear denim skirts, but I don't wear blue jeans at work. That's okay.

MK: I don't wear denim skirts.

SS: [laughter] I don't think it would go with anything.

MK: Much as I like though, I don't want to call out attention to myself.

SS: I remember when Caleb into pink dresses. There is the problem in terms of how you deal with a four-year old who wants to wear skirts. We went to the senior dinner because I was speaking again. My son decided that my daughter was really dressed up and he wanted to wear a dress. He had a dress. He picked out a flaming red dress with blue flowers that we let him buy at the secondhand trailer in Parsons. He wanted to wear that dress. It was really hard to tell a four-year old how he could wear that dress. But there were a lot of seniors who maybe wouldn't understand. So, instead he wore this flaming Mexican shirt. He decided that that was pretty, too. So, we felt a little bit more uncomfortable with him in a shirt.

MK: That he had an alternative one.

SS: Yes. It's hard for boys because there aren't too many pretty things in the same way that there are for little girls.

MK: I know. So, you've been here by the time the flood hit.

SS: Year and a half.

MK: You were away at that time, were you?

SS: I was home. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to Parsons to go to Nautilus with a friend of mine. The only reason we didn't get caught in the flood, because it's normal when we would have been there, was the people who were watching. She was going to pick up my son. The people who were watching my son could not get to the road. So, they were delayed by about an hour because of their culvert backing up and their road flooding. So, she finally called me from my house and said the rain was pretty bad, maybe we should cancel. By the time I passed her on the road going to my house, stretches of it were underwater. So, my babysitter called and said that she would bring my daughter here or else she would keep her. Everyone else said it was just rain. I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "The river has come up eight inches in the last fifteen minutes and I think my bridge is going to wash off." I thought she was being an alarmist. But she brought my daughter here, dropped her off, went back home again, and half hour later, her bridge was gone. She was cut off for three days. So, I had my daughter. Then I went home and got my son. We were home that night. My husband was in Morgantown. He'd been in Rowlesburg. He drove up to an indigent care committee up in Morgantown, didn't get any information about how bad it was, listened to the radio. The only thing he could get was WLS out of Chicago. So, he started home at 1:00 a.m. and was blocked in about twelve different places and finally got home at the next 4:00 p.m., spent thirteen hours on the road trying to get home.

MK: Normally, yes. It's a long trip.

SS: Yes, not even that. But he came down, was blocked coming across, ended up in Grafton, then in Philippi and couldn't get across, slept three hours in the emergency room, went back up, got across, couldn't get down, went back up, that sort of thing, helped people put up their fences and finally moved some roadblocks and drove across a bridge that was underwater to get onto fifty and come down the mountain. So, he wasn't home. But we were home. It was funny because again, my friend I was going to meet with, she called and asked me if I had a sump pump because her mother's basement was flooding and had never flooded before. She was in Parsons, here in St. George. I talked to her. Then I talked to the head of the Senior Center because I was supposed to do a clinic for pneumonia prevention to give the Pneumovax the next day. She'd gone down in the Senior Center, and she said they had two feet of water. This is about 8:00. They just lifted the plants up on the desk. There's nothing they could do. So, they just left. She decided to cancel the immunization clinic. She said the water was up to the door of Nautilus and that Parsons was flooding. About 15 minutes later, the phone went dead. So, we were really out of touch with what went on the rest of the night until the next morning. I did

some house calls in St. George, sent a lady to Oakland Hospital. Then I had the four-wheel drive truck. So, I drove into St. George on Tuesday afternoon, the day after the flood. It was unbelievable. It was totally unbelievable. The road through town was underwater. The power lines were down and into the water. The trailers in front of the school were gone. The post office was washed. The houses were just gone, got out in front of an old woman's house. She'd spent the night upstairs. It was so amazing. I walked into her house. I've seen floods before, but I've never seen a mud flood like we had here. There was three feet of mud. Her organ was laying over on its side. Her freezer was over on the side. Her house was totally destroyed. When the water came up, she grabbed her quilt off the quilt frame and went upstairs to her upper bedroom. She sat in the doorway to her upper bedroom and watched the water come up the steps. She couldn't believe it was that high outside. So, she thought it was pouring into her house and then it just couldn't get out. She really didn't believe that the water was up that high outside. So, she said she watched it come up and it came up to the second stair from the top. Then she sat there, and it sat there. Then it started going down. So, she thought it'd be okay. So, she went to bed. When I went there the next day, she was still in her pajamas with her booties on and her housecoat sitting on her doorstep upstairs. It's just a total disaster all around her with her quilt, just the house next door washed away, completely gone. You wonder if people like that, if they knew how bad it was, if they would have moved or if it would have been so overwhelming that they would have stayed where they were. But I think she was eighty-three, ninety-three, something like that – an old lady.

MK: Didn't she tell you about it?

SS: She came down for a tetanus shot a couple days later. I don't know at this point. I'm not even sure she's here. St. George is almost gone because it was largely elderly people whose families came and got them. So, what was here before and what's here after is just such a minority of the people that were here. Mostly the younger people stayed and so many of the older people have gone with family or have gone up to Cortland Acres to the independent housing up there, have relocated somewhere else. So, just if you go down the line of where people are, there are a few trailers here in town. But they tend to be younger people, younger families and so many of the older people have gone. I have one family up in the nursing home, mom, John, and (Gertrude Oval?), really interesting people. I was up in the nursing home last week. The nurses came and said that they went in, and he looked bad. He said he felt bad that he couldn't tell them where he felt bad. I had never taken care of him before the last month or two when he came into the nursing home with his wife. They were farmers down here. He lost his home. He lost all his equipment. He lost his tractors. He lost his barn. He lost everything that he had. When I went into his room, I asked him how he was doing. He said, "Okay." I said, "The nurses said that you were feeling bad. Can you tell me about it?" He said, "Well, it's just kind of all over." I said, "Are you feeling depressed, John?" He said, "Do you know what I've lost? I lost my whole life full of work. I lost my equipment in my barn and my house. I lost everything I had." Then the week after the flood, his wife had a stroke. She was on the Board of Health. She was a very sharp lady. He called her a "shy kid". He said, "She's just like a shy kid." She kind of functions on about maybe a four-year old level, maybe not even that, two to four-year old level. She can say, "Hi. How are you?" Make little, small talk, but she stares, and she picks and there's nothing left. So, he lost everything. He lost everything he had plus his wife of thirty years. In essence, her body's there, but not much else is there. I asked him if he'd been

down. He's not seen his house since the flood. He's really not seen by many people. It was just really hard. Because I think the only thing I could offer him was maybe the possibility of his living in an independent unit since he really doesn't need to be in the nursing home for himself, but she does. So, he's either going to have to give up the privacy and continue to stay in the nursing home with no privacy or maybe separate from her and move to some kind of independent housing. But that's really tragic. I mean, he felt he was doing as well as he could. But he had been on every committee and every organization, and he had been really active in the community. Now, he's been taken from his home, from his community, from his wife, from everything that he did. It's really hard. That's really hard to tell somebody that they have a lot to live for when you're not sure or when they're not sure. But I think for me, those have been the kind of tragedies that have been so hard. There's another man, who I've taken care of his wife for about the last year. He had cancer of the larynx about ten years ago and has a laryngectomy but has been doing very well. His wife has Parkinson's disease and has an organic brain syndrome and has been bedridden for about the last six months, eight months. He lived down in the Pulp Mill Bottom, had a little house and his car and didn't have a whole lot. He waited on her hand and foot. They want to put her in a nursing home. He couldn't bear that. So, he got up with her and he turned her every hour. She did not have a bed sore on her. I mean, he took wonderful care of her, tube fed her, changed her, had a lift to hoister onto the bedside commode, I mean, just took care of her so much. By the time the flood came, the water was coming up the street. He realized they'd have to move her. So, they got an ambulance. They got her out. It was like halfway up the wheels by the time his family, who came with him, went in to get a suitcase for him and came back out, they had to wade up to their chest through water. He moved up with someone else up Quality Hill. Then, Frances died within the week. In his case, he lost his home, his car, all their furniture, all their photos, all their possessions, everything they had, plus his wife, who he dearly loved, plus his full-time job in a sense, because she had been his full-time job for about the last year. He's living in a little FEMA trailer kind of up a mountain. The church bought him a little fifty-two Chevy Nova, so he at least has some transport. But with the snow and everything, he's not really been doing much. I really feared for him. Because I think he grieved openly, which I think was good. I mean, he could cry, and he could talk about what was going on. His wife was very religious. When she was in a car accident, she had written some things before she started losing her mind. It was a prayer to be read when she died. It was kind of to the Lord, take care of this daughter because of such and such, and take care of my husband because of such and such. She had always been the pillar in that family. He had fallen apart, he had gotten upset. She had been the pillar. Then over the last year or two, as she lost her mind, he had to assume that role. He had to become the strength. He felt that he took care of her because she would have taken care of him. I mean, they had a real loyalty to each other. I don't know, I really feared for him. He is doing okay. I had called the seniors to see if we could get him involved. While the weather was nice, just last week, he did go down to lunch with the seniors every day, which was a real big step. Because he had pretty much been house ridden in terms of his wife. He didn't go anywhere. He didn't do anything. He'd cut off all his social contacts. I'm hoping that he can get involved. But it's hard to lose any one of those things, to lose a wife or to lose a house or to lose a job. But to lose everything at the same time is real hard. Those people just stand out, I think. I have one lady, I take care of her parents. Her house was gone. They found an oak tabletop and a gun cabinet. That's all they have left of everything that they had. But she said we're young and we didn't have that much. It wasn't that long ago that we didn't have anything. When I see my mom having to clean up her house, I'm not so sorry

that it went down the river. You see people like that and it's encouraging. But they have the youth to rebuild and the spirit to rebuild. I worry much more about older people because they don't feel like they have the options or the strength or the energy. I think when Thanksgiving came, the waters came up. People had just cleaned out their house. They thought that they were going to get flooded again. A lot of people said I couldn't do it a second time. I didn't think I was going to be able to get through it the first time, but we did. I couldn't do it a second time. A lot of people took water again just last week when the river came up. It was real hard. It was just like a sore place that was just getting better and it kind of got bumped. A lot of people are reconsidering. There's a lot more winter up in Davis, but there's not any water. I think a lot of people are looking at where they want to live. Because they don't want to move away from their families. But people don't want to go through that again. I think that's reasonable. I sure wouldn't buy a house in the Pulp Mill Bottom, even if it was cheap. I have a friend who's trying to sell me hers cheap. I'm not interested.

MK: You've given some real vivid examples of older people. Are there health problems in general that we see those flood –

SS: Okay. Initially, we thought that there would be problems that you see in any disaster in terms of waterborne illnesses and diarrheal diseases and infectious kind of problems. We really saw very little of that. I think St. George was an excellent example of a small community that got organized very efficiently, very quickly. There was a sanitation engineer, whose family lived here who came in from the outside. I think PN Dotson and her family from the church organized the food. There was hot food. People took other people in. By the second or third night, there was no one in this area who didn't have a home. Everyone went somewhere with someone. People were stacked up. (Marguerite Hoffman?) had twenty people stacked up at her house. But she's got a big house. It was kind of fun. Many people who hadn't talked for years found themselves living in the same house. It was all right. They discovered that the other guy wasn't so bad, especially with the lights out. I mean, it was okay. But initially, we didn't see that because it was such a spotty disaster. We had fresh water brought down the mountain. Water was brought in from Grafton. The porta potties came in from the fire department in Grafton. VEPCO helped with heavy equipment to dig pits for the garbage. Things were managed really well on a local level. I think Parsons did not do as well because it was larger. There was a lot more political infighting. That wasn't true here. But we didn't see that. We gave two- to three hundred tetanus shots the first week we were open. We got free tetanus from the state. Interestingly enough, because of the cleanup publications, we saw a lot of bleach burns. Because people did not respect the bleach. They used it full strength. They got second degree burns on their hands. So, we treated a lot of bleach burns. It was so dirty, and they just couldn't handle it. They thought, "Well, if this much is good, then a little bit more is better and straight bleach must be the way to go." So, people use straight bleach and they burn themselves. But other than that, we saw very little. Schools closed, so there weren't the infectious diseases that we usually saw. So, I think as long as school was closed and people were relatively isolated, even though families were doubled up, we didn't see very much when school went back. It's hard to know what the cause of it was. But initially, we saw strep. Strep just went through the community like wildflower. We saw more strep than we'd seen in any one time. We have special kits for detecting it. We have a five-minute test now. So, we could document what we were dealing with. We just saw a lot of strep. Then the bug started. We had four major viruses or four major

viral syndromes that went through the community. People who had not been ill for ten years, people who hadn't missed a day's work in twenty years were on their backs for two, three weeks. I haven't seen it as devastating in winter, in terms of infectious diseases. We didn't see people die. So, it really it wasn't an influenza type picture. We didn't see the deaths from pneumonia and such. But there were some bad bugs that went through the community with super high secondary infection rate, just saw a lot of ear infections, a lot of bronchitis, a lot of pneumonia, a lot of problems. I don't know if that had to do with – instead of having a gradual traveling through the community, if people were isolated because the schools were closed and then we're thrown back together all at once, or what happened. But it's lasted for two months now. It's tapering down. We're seeing less of it. But our patient load doubled. We only see sick people here. People don't come in with runny noses. I mean, they wait till they've got pneumonia. They don't go waste their money on a runny nose. That's another change that I see here as opposed to the city or other places that I worked at is that I maybe see one well child, maybe two well child a month, except for the ones that are mandated by the medical card program. We don't see health maintenance. We don't see the little runny nose. Mom brings a kid in with a temperature for one day and nothing else. We don't see that here. Most of the people who come and get antibiotics, not because we hand them out freely, but because they wait until they need an antibiotic. In terms of infectious diseases, this year has been really bad. I don't know if it was the stress that debilitated people. I haven't really been able to sort out flood victims from non-flood victims because it seems to hit people who were working for flood recovery as well as people who were victimized by the flood seem to hit everybody the same. I can't say that the flood is less stressful for people who haven't been directly affected.

MK: Oh, interesting.

SS: I was driving someone up to Morgantown for radiation therapy. She started her treatments right after the flood and lived in Hendricks. So, I had to drive through Parsons of Pennsylvania Avenue and over into Hendricks once a week. At first, it was devastating. I mean, it was really devastating because my patients lived along that road. I knew where their houses used to be. That was really hard. I thought, okay, the first week is bad, but it's something that you get used to. Each week, it got worse. I think because St. George was cleaned up and not too long a time, at least it looked like it was getting cleaned up. There was so much in Parsons that even though people were working twelve hours a day, it seemed never ending. You drive along the road and the tennis shoes look like stones. I mean, they're just in the mud from falling off the trucks. As they hauled the garbage up, the sneakers would fall out the back.

MK: This was from the shoe factory?

SS: From the shoe factory. Right. As they hauled up all that muck, they slipped out. So, you would be driving over tennis shoes as you drove down the road for weeks and weeks and weeks. I think it was very interesting. My babysitter lives at Bull Run, which is pretty deserted. The river rampaged through there. But there weren't many houses. Nature healed itself. You could tell that there had been a flood because of where the boulders were. But they were just as pretty outside the stream bed as they were in the stream bed. Further up the road, where there were a lot of trailers in Opal Town and the bend in the river where things came down the river and then stuck in trees, mattresses ten feet off the ground, up in trees. That for some reason was so

devastating. It was almost like nature healed itself. But where we had blighted it with all of our junk. It was so much harder to take. I guess Parsons was like that, where the nursery bottoms are and where the big equipment was working and where they were burning and tearing the houses down and everything. Personally, I'm not touched by it. People I take care of have been touched by it. I've been touched in that way. Hearing them and listening to them was one thing, driving through there and seeing it was unchanging, week after week – it was hard to handle. I talked to the dental assistant up the mountain. She said she'd not been down to Parsons. This is ten miles away since the flood because she couldn't handle it. So, some friends came to visit her. They decided instead of going that way, they would go down the opposite way to Petersburg. So, they drove down having a good time. Then when they were hit by the flood damage, didn't talk for the next hour, hour and a half. This was weeks after. So, I think the stress wasn't just if you were hit personally. So, maybe that explains it. Maybe it was just a bad bug, hard to know. But I think there are some good stories. There are people who have changed their lives because of an event that they couldn't control and have changed the way they think about things. I think that's been real positive. There was a lady that I had talked to you about whose house was exactly the way it was when the kids left. The kids have been gone for ten years. She wouldn't have changed anything. But when the flood devastated her house and she had to redo it, she decided that they really didn't need these bedrooms that they weren't staying in. So, she turned one into a studio and another one into a master bedroom. They're going to put in a Jacuzzi and sliding glass doors and a deck. She said it won't cost that much more. When I first saw her, she was totally devastated. Her business had been ruined. Her home had been ruined. Her mother's home had been ruined. She wanted tranquilizers. She was really down in the dump for a month, six weeks. Two months after the flood, she was coming out of it. The last time I saw her, she was fine. So, I think some people do well.

MK: What is her business?

SS: The pizza place. I think other people have said things to me about how I used to think this was so important. Then when I saw what could happen in such a short period of time, I realized that it's really not that important. Whether or not they will start collecting things again and forget is a whole other story, I think. But at least it's happened once. I remember reading a line about how you shouldn't collect so much that you would be relieved to see your house burned down. I think that tends to happen. We do tend to accumulate. Even though no one would have wished this on themselves or someone else, it certainly was a great equalizer in terms of what it did. For the people who got out with their health, I think it's very reassuring for them to know that their house was gone, but their lives weren't lost. They didn't lose it. So, few people were killed in this flood, I think that was a godsend. Because if there had been a loss of life that was proportionate to the property loss, I think it would have been really devastating. It would have been much harder for people to recover from. Most people got out lucky. They lost material things. Some people lost a lot, but it's replaceable. I think a lot of people realize that. Very few people lost their lives. At least from my point, when I was trying to get people through the initial time, I think that was something that you could point out and most people could realize even though they were grieving for whatever they had lost or whatever change is going to come about in their life. I think it'll be very interesting to see what happens in the long term. What happens to three years down the line in terms of families? Do they stay together, or do they break up? Are they stronger because they realize they have each other? Or does it participate in a breakup

that was maybe coming before the flood, but material things were keeping them together? I think that'll be real interesting to see.

MK: Did the flood change you, Susan?

SS: The flood changed me. I don't know if it changed me as much as it heightened my awareness of some things I knew before. I drove along the river last night. I am always amazed by what water can do in terms of breaking down rock and slow things that it does. I think it was such a stark example of what it can do quickly. I think it's a reminder of how precarious our existence is. We sometimes really think that the buildings we put up or the skyscrapers or the jet, airplanes or whatever are lasting. I mean, we think because our lifetimes are so short, we think of this culture as always having been and always going on. I think it pointed out how precarious our existence is, how minute our forces are compared to natural forces. So, I think in terms of nature, like going up Bull Run and seeing how beautifully nature healed itself when it wasn't interfered with. It makes me think much more of what this land must have been like when there were only Indians here. I thought a lot about the fact that if there were just teepees and trails, the destruction would have been gone the next day. Instead, we're dealing with all of our refuge and all of the junk that has floated out of our trailers or floated down with them or out of our houses or our bridges or whatever. I think the other thing is seeing the way people pulled together during the crunch. It was really interesting. When I came down on Tuesday, people were fending for each other. People were out looking for people. Most people knew someone who was on medication that had lost their medication in the flood. People really pitched in and helped each other. We kept the clinic open for the next seven days. We stayed open on Saturday and Sunday. I think as long as it was local, people were really helping each other. There was some infighting, not locally here, but again in Parsons and power struggles. But they were minute, compared to what most people did. I think people gave what they had to give. The people who weren't flooded out brought out coats that they didn't need. People brought down food, people sent money, people spent out the ham operators. It wasn't just a kind of PTA for two hours in the evening. It was people really went out of their way. They really went out of their way. They shared what they had in terms of their time and their energy and material things. I think the weekend was very hard because that's when the tourists started showing up. It went from a family disaster where people were helping each other to outsiders just peering in. It was awful. It was gawkers in a line. It took me fifteen minutes to get two blocks down to get to the shelter to send out a message by the ham operators up to Morgantown on Saturday. People were rude. I mean, people would stop their cars in front of somebody's house and take a picture of them dumping everything that they owned out on their front lawn and expecting to smile. I guess you realize the intensity of what people felt in the intensity of their reaction to those outsiders. The PN sign – PN is the most mild-mannered lady I ever met, and there went this sign that said, "Stay and help and if you can't go home then send help." That's pretty aggressive for her. Just a feeling I had – anger, I was more angry at these people than I was at the flood because they had no right. The flood just kind of did it. That was interesting to watch and also to feel in myself – Virginia plates and Maryland plates, outside plates, Pennsylvania plates. So, I don't know if it changed me. I think it heightened what I already knew – reminded me of what I already knew, but maybe forgot.

[end of transcript]