Guide to the Oral History
of the
Big Thompson Disaster
July 31, 1976
Preface

On the eve of the Colorado Centennial, July 31, 1976, a concentrated and stationary storm rained twelve inches of water on the upper Big Thompson Canyon in a three hour period. The resulting flash flood swept away 323 homes, damaged another 121, destroyed 52 businesses, and washed out U. S. Highway 34 in a dozen places. It killed 139 people. For loss of life the Big Thompson flood was the worst disaster in Colorado History.

Questions about cause, warning, rescue, prevention, and recovery inevitably arose. People were curious; they wanted to know what happened. Some wished to place blame, while others wanted to review the circumstance to prevent reoccurrence. Media reporters provided piecemeal answers in their articles and brief reports. For historical purposes, however, somewhat deeper and more comprehensive research was necessary. For this reason Colorado State University released me half-time to conduct oral history interviews with victims, rescue workers, agency personnel, police, politicians, and others who had something to do with the flood. The idea was to obtain thirty to forty first-hand accounts, tape-recorded, and transcribed for deposit at Colorado State University and at the State Historical Society. As part of this effort the interviews were critically evaluated by three professionals outside the project.

Forty-one interviews took place involving fifty people. I traveled to Loveland, Denver, Estes Park, and Golden; spent three days in
the canyon; stayed a Sunday afternoon at the Loveland morgue; and observed the recovery of a body from a debris pile. Interviewees signed legal releases for the Historical Society, and I sent participants a cassette copy of the interview. The Experiment Station of Colorado State University provided funds for transcribing and editing. Thus, the project was completed.

The Big Thompson flood is a relatively minor disaster compared to others. At the same time, the Philippines disaster, for example, killed an estimated 5,300 persons and left 30,000 homeless. The Big Thompson, nonetheless, has some unusual features; a highly efficient rescue operation, an emergent body identification system, and a number of local political questions about recovery and reconstruction. It is, moreover, the worst disaster in state history and a warning for the future.

David McComb
Colorado State University
July 1, 1978
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<th>LENGTH OF INTERVIEW</th>
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<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>observer</td>
<td>Glen Haven/Drake</td>
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<td>Salvation Army - rescue, recovery</td>
<td>Ft. Collins</td>
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</table>
Interviewee: Anonymous

Date: August 22, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 20 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

The interviewer preferred to remain anonymous, but stated that use of the interview was open. He and his wife lived above the road between Drake and Glen Haven. They commented about the night of the flood and the damage to a house near them.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: Ault, Robert

Date: September 8, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 45 minutes

Restrictions: to be used only with permission until January 1, 1981

Description:

Ault was the Chief of Police in Estes Park and his main role was organizing relief efforts for victims. He described the town effort and what was done. He also commented on the cooperative spirit of Estes Park and the psychological impact of the event on staff and community.

Interviewer: David McComb
Birks was the Salvation Army Captain who set up the canteen at the Sheriff's headquarters in Loveland. He talked about the preparation of the Salvation Army for disaster and specifically about his work in Loveland. He ran not only the canteen but also a mobile unit to feed people working at roadblocks.
Interviewee: Baker, Leo

Date: September 8, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 30 minutes

Restrictions: Closed until 1980

Description:

Lt. Baker was the officer in charge at the Sheriff's office in Estes Park. He organized the roadblocks and rescue efforts. The interview was brief and useful mainly to confirm the sequence of events.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: Chappell, Mary and Charles

Date: August 23, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 20 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

The Chappells described the flood at Montrose and the destruction of houses across the road from their motel. Mrs. Chappell made a rather interesting comment about the various unusual noises brought by the disaster -- the storm, the river, helicopters, and road equipment.

Interviewer: David McComb
Michael Charney was assigned by the coroner to run the Loveland morgue and to organize body identification. The morgue operation had to change and evolve to process the great number of bodies. Charney spoke about what happened at what time and about the various problems involved with lack of facilities, equipment, records, condition of victims, working with relatives of victims, reporters, volunteers, and security.
Description:

Dr. Deal, a mathematician, was caught by the rising waters while on the highway to attend a square dance. He and his wife Nancy had to abandon their 1968 Plymouth to the flood and flee up the canyon wall. With seventy-five others they were flown out the next day.

The interview contains commentary about the rise of the river, what they did to escape, and their rescue.
Description:

Dooney led a team of mental health professionals to Loveland High School to aid victims, but found no real need there. They decided to go to the morgue and became the staff link between the deputy coroner and the people.

The mental health team then took on "emergent" qualities, helped develop the identification system, put it on computers, managed the reception of relatives, and gave comfort to the grieved.
Description:

Captain Englebert of the Sheriff's Office was the man who organized the rescue effort. He called in various teams and coordinated them for the Sheriff. Englebert earlier had seen to the training and organization of the rescue teams -- an effort that paid off during the disaster. The interview covers what happened, when, and why.
These three park rangers from Rocky Mountain National Park assisted in the initial rescue work in the upper canyon. David Essex, the Chief Ranger, spoke first about the role of the Park Service in the disaster and their first responses. Ron Cotten talked mainly about his area of responsibility, large maintenance equipment. Dwight Hamilton told of leading groups of victims on foot out of the canyon.

Interviewee: Essex, David (and Ronald Cotten and Dwight Hamilton).

Date: September 10, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour

Restrictions: None

Description:

Interviewer: David McComb
Mrs. Ferguson ran the Calico Kate Gift Shop in Glen Haven and lived in a house near the river. The flood came near her doorstep, but her worst experience came when she almost drowned in a misguided local rescue attempt.

The interview illustrates the economic plight of an older survivor and gives a description of the flood.
Description:

Greenwalt was the head of Ag Helicopters and was called into the Big Thompson early Sunday, August 1. He flew at night with spotlights on the river. He then engaged in the helicopter rescue mission for the next week, and as of August 16th still was on call with the Sheriff's department.

He described flying conditions, organization, the condition of people, and the canyon.
Senator Gary Hart flew over the canyon on the morning of the disaster and then returned to Washington, D. C. to expedite relief. He describes the canyon, the presidential declaration of a disaster area, and the political aspects of disaster relief.
Hatay was city manager of Loveland during the Big Thompson Flood. He spent the first night at the police station and then directed city efforts for flood recovery. Loveland itself was not badly damaged except for the recreation areas and the water purification system.

He spoke in an orderly, articulate manner about Loveland in the disaster and what the city has done for recovery. There will be, apparently, no impact by the flood on the city budget.
Gary Haxton and his family escaped from the flood when it hit Waltonia. He told of the rise in the river, leaving his cabin, and the finding of a survivor on an island in the river the next morning. He then drove his car out over ranch land to the south and returned home.
Interviewee: Hays, Rick

Date: August 24, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 45 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

Hays described the role of Mountain Bell in restoring telephone communications to the Big Thompson-Estes Park region. He was called to duty to help mobilize repair units, and personally manned a mobile unit in Estes Park to call messages out to relatives around the nation. He explained why the phone system could not have been used as an early warning device for this disaster.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: Hovey, Richard

Date: August 12, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 2 hours

Restrictions: None

Description:

Hovey was the captain of the motorized patrol, a volunteer four-wheel drive organization on call with the Sheriff's office. His group was called on July 31st to warn people at the mouth of the Big Thompson. He was there before the flood hit and observed the rise of the river from the Dam Store. Thereafter he served as a staff man to Capt. John Englebert who organized the rescue effort.

The interview has much to say about the chronology of events, the organization of disaster relief, and people involved.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: Huffsmith, Richard

Date: August 23, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 30 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

Huffsmith who lost a son in the disaster lived in a low area in Montrose. His land was inundated and suffered water and silt damage. The son died elsewhere in the canyon. He told about his warning of the flood, the lack of a warning system, and problems with the sheriff's deputies.

Interviewer: David McComb
The Kilbourns lived in a house above flood level at Glen Haven. They were able to view the Big Thompson and briefly recount their experience with the disaster. Their property sustained only minor damage.
Governor Richard Lamm described his role in the disaster, what he observed, its relationship to the Colorado Centennial celebration, and the political aspects of relief. He commented about his vacation in Estes Park, an event which caused some reaction at the time.
Interviewee: Kruchten, Alvin

Date: August 20, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour.

Restrictions: None

Description:

Kruchten was with friends at a cabin near Glen Haven when the flood hit. He recounted going into Glen Haven on Sunday morning, the damage he observed, and the behavior of people. On that day he hiked out to Estes Park twice and back in once.

The interview is particularly good for a description of damage and the rescue operations.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: Littlejohn, Tim

Date: October 6, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 45 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

Officer Littlejohn of the Colorado State Patrol was trapped at Drake by the flood waters. He was there throughout the night and aided in the rescue effort the next day. He talked about his work that night and gave observations about the river, the damage, and the people. The State Patrol has a three hour tape by Littlejohn on the same subject.

Interviewer: David McComb
Lloyd, the state representative from the 45th district which includes the Big Thompson area, was at the flood scene in Loveland on July 31st. He worked as a liaison between agencies to aid in the rescue effort and to help victims. He flew over the canyon with the governor early Sunday morning. He spoke about various political aspects of the flood, his experience, and the long-term effects of the disaster.
Virginia McGee and her family lived at the main store in Drake which they rented and managed. With the rise in the river they fled down the canyon and finally took refuge at the Park Terrace Motel near Cedar Cove. She told about her experience in Drake while there and what happened afterwards.
Interview: McM~.er, John and George Woodson

Date: September 6, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

These two men were caught in the Narrows as the flood came through. They describe their miraculous escape and the terror of a night clinging to the side of the canyon wall. They were the only two people known to survive the Narrows. Five weeks later they were still having restless nights and bad moments because of their experience.

John McMaster was injured in the arm in a fall during the night. His voice is the one which does most of the narration.

Interviewer: David McComb
Sam Minter led the Mennonite Disaster Service in the cleanup of the Big Thompson flood. In the interview he spoke about the MDS organization and how it operated.
The Morgans own and run the Park Terrace Motel in the Montrose-Cedar Cove area. During the flood Rachel and George Morgan took in survivors and later served as a center for rescue activities. Since their motel was intact they could provide food, lodging, water, and baths for the neighborhood. Their son Greg was trapped in Estes Park by the storm after passing through Waltonia as the water was building up.
She was executive director of the Larimer County Chapter of the American Red Cross. She explained her involvement and that of the Red Cross in the disaster. There was no overlap nor conflict with other groups, and her operation was a success.

The interview explains the role of various groups and describes the condition of refugees.
Rappe, who was the coordinator of disaster programs for the state, described state preparation for disaster and what his office did during the Big Thompson flood. He spoke also about the recovery response of his office and the application for federal disaster funds. Jack Truby, an assistant, sat in on the interview and occasionally added questions and comments to the interview.
Interviewee: Rogers, Corky

Date: September 8, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour

Restrictions: Open except for comments about the Loveland Chamber of Commerce

Description:

Rogers was the director of the Estes Park Chamber of Commerce. He saw his role in the disaster to aid in the economic recovery of Estes Park and the region. Since the area depended almost entirely on tourism and because the media inaccurately associated the flood with Estes Park, he launched an advertising campaign to counteract the prevalent story and to aid in the recovery of the tourist industry. The interview covered his thoughts and actions in this campaign.

Interviewer: David McComb
Reverend Bob Schelling, an Episcopal minister, helped establish an Interfaith organization for the aid of victims on a long-term basis. Interfaith provided labor, material, guidance for grant applications, and emotional as well as spiritual help. Schelling talked about the start of the organization, funding, how it operated, and what it has done.
Interviewee: Sidwell, Irma

Date: August 21, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 20 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

Mrs. Sidwell was the postmistress in Glen Haven. The post office was open at the time of the interview. She told of the flood, what happened to the town and post office, and about the clean up.

Interviewer: David McComb
Bill Thomas was a captain in the State Patrol. He arrived at the Dam Store at about the time the river began to rise. He described the sequence of events at the Loveland end of the canyon, rescue operations, his role in the event, and the relationship of the State Patrol to the Sheriff's Office.
Larry Timm, the county planner, commented upon land use, or zoning, restrictions in the canyon. The Big Thompson was settled before the county began to think of such matters. The interview described the dilemma of planning -- what is ideal versus the political reality.
Description:

Captain Urista of the Sheriff's Office was trapped by the flood in the area of Montrose and Cedar Cove. He spent the night working at rescue efforts. The interview covers his experiences, description of the flood, and the rescue effort.
Description:

Watson was the Sheriff at the time of the flood and directed the rescue operation. The interview deals with the organization, preparation, and carrying out of the effort. There is a description of the siphon washing away and speculation about the long-term tax consequences of the flood.
Interviewee: Weller, William D

Date: December 13, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

General Weller was the commander of the National Guard which aided in the disaster rescue. He described the details of mobilization. The work of the guard, funding, and the relationship of the guard to the Larimer Sheriff's office.

Interviewer: David McComb
Mary Wells was at the Canyon Inn above the Narrows where her friend played for musical entertainment. They were warned to get out by phone call, police, and people who stopped. They left and did not find out about the flood until the next day.

The interview is useful for information about the warning in the lower canyon.
Bill Wells owned and ran the Glen Haven Inn. His hotel which suffered only minor damage became the headquarters of refugees and rescue operators. Wells talked about the flood and the aftermath in detail. His interview demonstrates the optimistic spirit for rebuilding the town.
Interviewee: Winder, Kathleen

Date: September 3, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 45 minutes

Restrictions: None

Description:

Ms. Winder was head of the Division of Social Services (part of the Department of Social Services) in Larimer County. Some of her staff aided at the morgue in the identification procedure. She commented on the situation, the impact of the disaster on her agency, and the stress involved in the return to normal conditions.

Interviewer: David McComb
Interviewee: World, Tom

Date: August 19, 1976

Length of Tape/Pages: 1 hour.

Restrictions: None

Description:

Captain Tom World was the head of the Salvation Army in Fort Collins. His office played a supportive role to the activities of the Salvation Army which manned the canteen at the Water Conservancy District Headquarters.

His comments involve the general role of the Salvation Army in disasters and a comparison of the Big Thompson with other disasters he witnessed. He said that the rescue operation could not be better.

Interviewer: David McComb