

#486

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Name of Informant Joe Massa

Address Vermillion, South Dakota

Date of Interview June 16, 1972

Name of Researcher Stephen R. Ward

Others Present \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview Vermillion, South Dakota

Added Notes \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Headings under which you feel this interview should be filed:

Experiencing flood in Boulder Canyon

Demographic Information on Informant

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Sex Male County Clay

Socio-economic status \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

From Where? \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Moves in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_ Reasons for moves: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Q. Today is Friday, June 16, 1972; we're in Vermillion, South Dakota, talking with Joe Massa, University of South Dakota. This is Steve Ward speaking. We're looking at a map of...a geological survey map of the Sturgis, South Dakota, northwest...northeast four...quadrangle, 15 degree quadrangle, and we're talking about the flood that hit Rapid City a week ago, and we're pin-pointing now, Joe Massa's position as regards the flood itself. Joe, we have you here in the number 13 section on this map in the Black Hills National Forest. Is that correct?

A. Right.

Q. Yeah, okay. Now, maybe you should explain exactly where your cabin is...

A. Okay, it's on Highway 16A which is the road that goes through Boulder Canyon between Sturgis and Deadwood, approximately five miles out of Sturgis heading towards Deadwood west. And it's located along the Bear Butte Creek, which flows out of the Hills and enters Boulder Canyon itself about a quarter of a mile west of...of our cabin. And we're located then on the south side of the...of the creek, which runs between our cabin and Highway 16A.

Q. And you've got a little bridge going up, huh?

A. No, access...we have had bridges, but in the last twelve or fifteen years, there've been several floods...

Q. That's right.

A. And so we quit building bridges.

Q. And you go over the creek...

A. And we simply drive through the creek north of here; usually a caterpillar will have to come down and smooth it out...the creek bed a little bit and then we pull out the bigger rocks and then just drive through.

Q. In normal times, what's...what's the depth of the creek?

A. I would say, in the last five years, since the last flood, which widened the creek somewhat, it's run about...it probably varies up to maybe a foot deep at the maximum. It's interesting, but we're on the only part of Bear Butte Creek which normally runs above ground. Once it passes our cabin, and...and, in general goes off our land, which runs another mile down the road, it pretty much goes underground. And Bear Butte Creek runs underground all the way in to Sturgis where...where it comes up again going on to Fort Meade.

Q. Oh, I see.

A. All...all the time here, it's running underground until you get north, where it comes north of Sturgis...really on the northeast side of Sturgis, it again surfaces and runs out to Fort Meade.

Q. Oh, and before you...before it gets to you here, it is underground?

A. Yes, running...it's coming around the south...

Q. Right...I see.

A. It's coming down from the south and it surfaces right...about right before it gets to us. There a couple of main springs which tend to feed it here. But it's generally under...underground.

Q. So that's only maybe a thousand yards or so...

A. Yeah.

Q. And this is a mile square.

A. Right, yeah...

Q. Yeah, okay. So you were located in that time when the flood broke, is that where...?

A. Well, right.. We were at the cabin, my wife and I and the kids and my brother and his wife and their children and my sister and her husband-- her husband from Rapid City was down...happened to be down that day, and..

Q. How many people...thirteen...fifteen?

A. Altogether? Two, three, four, five...two...three is five...four is nine...about fourteen people...were located there. And...

Q. This was on the evening of...

A. Yeah, about four o'clock in the afternoon on the ninth.

Q. On the ninth?

A. Right. The particular situation of our cabin is surrounded, as the map indicates, by a pretty high mountains, we're kinda down in a little valley...

Q. Yeah, 4,000 mountain elevation.

A. (Both men talking at once.) Running around in there, it's pretty vertical...pretty rapid rise, so you really aren't aware of the weather conditions until they're immediately upon you, unless you look to the west and it's generally open, but most of your rains...

Q. Looking over Boulder Park...?

A. Yeah, looking over Boulder Park...and the golf course it'll be...but

looking from the east...looking towards the east, you can't see anything 'til it's right on top of you. There had been some large cumulus clouds building up throughout the day, but thunder showers anytime from three to seven at night during the summer in the Black Hills is fairly common. In fact, I would...I would guess that it probably rains every other day up there.

Q. Does it really?

A. Every other day, yeah...generally a light thing or just clouds over and we get a little rain, so...

Q. Was there anything in particular...there wasn't anything in...particularly ominous about...?

A. No, no, it didn't seem to be. And the weather reports, hadn't really been paying any attention to 'em. We are always aware of the fact, though, that June is...is not the best month to be out there, from the standpoint of that creek, because there have been other floods there. About every two years somebody gets stranded out there...the water gets too high to drive the car across or something. Normally we don't really go out there, until after the \_\_\_\_\_ or what we call the flood season, is over. And..but, we happened to be out there earlier than that...this time. There wasn't anything in particular that day... and some large clouds started building up and you could hear the rumble of the thunder and so forth. And then it was hot enough that we expected that there'd be great big hail; we never have to worry about tornadoes, and so...

Q. So then what happened?

A. Well, it started to rain a little bit, and then it started to hail a little, some pretty good-sized hail stones, but not very...not very many...not very dense. We were particularly concerned, at this point, about the hail because my brother had just an hour before that bought a new car. (Laughter) and it was parked out there, and so he was a little concerned about the hail. Well, he wasn't there yet, when it.. when it...it started to rain, actually. And there's a little patio behind the cabin which was a drain in it and that...as it started to rain more and more, that thing started to fill, so we went out and pulled the plug on it so that it would drain. By then it was raining pretty hard, and we called my brother, and he said, well, they just had a little rain shower there. And he was going to come out.

Q. Now, he was where?

A. He was in Sturgis.

Q. He was in Sturgis?

A. Yeah, and he was gonna drive out. Now, my brother-in-law who had driven out from Rapid earlier in the afternoon said when they passed through Tilford, they'd gone through a pretty heavy shower, but it was just a spotty rain shower, it wasn't that out of the ordinary. So he was out there...so my brother showed up then probably about five o'clock. And it was raining pretty hard then, so my brother-in-law from Rapid decided that they'd better go home and get across the creek...got stuck a little bit, 'cause the water was a little

high, but he made it through all right. Got up there. And my brother-in-law had a large...a station wagon, and we followed him down to the creek, and he drove right through it. I don't know why we didn't think to get our cars across the creek, but I think we were kind of toying with the idea of a little adventure and maybe being stuck here a few days.

Q. Yeah.

A. Yeah, something like that. Luckily, we didn't take those cars across the creek, because had we done that, we'd a taken them across the creek, and would've left them maybe thirty or forty feet from the creek within our property line...within our gate. And had we done that, we wouldn't a had our automobiles anymore.

Q. Just one point of clarification, about how...I've been there and I've.. would you say it's about...you're about a hundred feet above the creek?

A. Well, it's about a hundred...well, in elevation, we're probably about...

Q. In elevation, not...

A. About forty feet above the creek.

Q. Just about forty feet, okay.

A. But, we're...it's about a twenty-five foot creek bank, and then it gradually terraces back, and then there's another one hundred feet up to about that forty-foot level.

Q. Yeah, okay. So you are above the creek?

A. Right.

Q. But,...

- A. Yeah, but back and also back...(Two talking at once--unclear).
- Q. But if you had to drive through the creek to get to the road, or stay within your property to park, then you were getting down at creek level. And..and you would have lost...
- A. And...and the rise is more rapid to the gate, so that we would have been...and as the creek rose, it eventually went up to our gate, which it's never done before. So we'd a been within that...within that area.
- Q. Okay, so then, we're about five o'clock and it's raining and then...so when do you first begin to realize that something more than just the ordinary's taking place?
- A. Well, about 5:30 we realized because it...it's raining and...and.. it has been raining for about an hour.
- Q. Is it raining hard or is it just...?
- A. Yeah, very hard, in fact...well, it continues to intensify and it gets to the point where you can't even see the walls of the canyon, which... which are a quarter of a mile away. It's just a sheet of water. At that point, we realized that there was going to be a lot of water. But, again, we thought, you know, it might rain for another half an hour and clear up. It's...but...
- Q. You've seen rain that hard...?
- A. Yeah, seen rain that hard for a short amount of time; it'll raise the level of the creek somewhat, but that's it. And it hadn't been raining a lot the previous days either, so we weren't that worried about... the creek itself was down pretty much.



Q. Now, did your brother...or is it brother-in-law...did he get out, and..?

A. Yeah, he had no trouble, he got across the creek.

Q. And he left?

A. And left.

Q. Went back to Rapid City?

A. Went back to Rapid City.

Q. Okay. So then, what...when was your first recollection of something rather serious taking place beyond 5:30?

A. Well, we put...put the...we decided...we thought it was prob'ly gonna quit raining, so we drug in the barbecue. We were going to barbecue some hamburgers, and...so we drug the thing in under the porch and lit it and sat under there probably trying to eat about six o'clock. We went ahead and cooked the hamburgers, and it kept rainin' to beat the band. And so we ate, and then went down to the creek again, and here it was seven o'clock and it was still raining very hard. And the creek was starting to rise and quite rapidly.

Q. Now, was it dark?

A. It wasn't dark then yet, but because of the rain, it was dark enough that I couldn't take any pictures. I thought I'd go down and take some pictures of the creek, and I had a little...we had a little Japanese equivalent of the Kodak Instamatic, which has a ca...a device on it that if you press a button and need a flash bulb, a little red light comes on. I went down to take a picture and the little red light came on, and I said, "Well, I'm not going to be able to take a picture", but

I took a couple anyway, so it was that dark. My brother and I, we went... we went down to the creek, after we ate, about seven and took a look at it, and it...it was really running fast. It was quite high. Probably by then, it was about fifteen feet high. And, you know, it was still raining quite hard. We went...we have a barn that's...then west at the edge of our property line...a little farther west which is very close to the creek, but on a high bank, which is probably about thirty feet up off the base of the creek. And we've been concerned about that, because every time it's flooded, it's gotten closer and closer to washing it out. In fact, we're going to move that barn up to the cabin and make a bunkhouse out of it. But we went down there and started looking around and it...it was really raining hard. We went back down to where we usually cross the creek, and there's a gully a little east of that... a draw...that... that you can see at one time has carried water, but it's all grown in. There's trees in there and bushes and all this type of thing. It...it hadn't carried any significant amount of water for a number of years, even despite the floods we've had in the past. I remember standing at the creek, which at...at a point which is about, I would say, about fifty feet away from where this draw enters the creek, and looking down that direction, and there was no water at all coming out of there. I looked back to the west again, said a few words to my brother...I can't remember, just a talking about the water or something.. and no less than 45 seconds later, we turned around and that whole canyon was just running with water about four feet deep. So apparently,

just a wall of water was kinda gushing down through there. That'd be right down through here, which is indicated by a broken water line, but the water...no wait a minute, that is wrong. It would be down someplace \_\_\_\_\_ the creek, this is the gully right here.

Q. So almost directly east and a little bit to the south.

A. Right.

Q. About...what...

A. It parallels the...the creek parallels the cabin on the east side, about ten feet away from the...actually...no, maybe...twenty-five, thirty feet away from the cabin.

Q. Oh, I see. Okay.

A. And that gully was all of a sudden just a rushing torrent of water, which I'd never seen before. I'd never seen that run before. So then it continued to get darker, and the creek just continued to come up and we went down...there were huge...there was a sixty-foot cottonwood tree, at least, well, maybe...it had to be higher than that... maybe eighty or one hundred-foot cottonwood tree, that sat on the edge of the creek, right...right down by the barn. We went down there and saw that thing fall down. We were a little concerned about that because the REA pole ran right by that.

Q. Oh, yeah. Now this is north and west...

A. Yeah, north and west, but it...it didn't hit the REA line. It...there were boulders coming down through the creek and trees and just...

Q. Is that right?

- A. Oh, yeah. It was...it was really starting to run and then the highway which is north of...north of the creek, there's...a large cliff that comes right down...right north of the cabin on the north side... on the north side of the road and as the rain kept coming, there... the road started washing away. We saw a highway patrolman drive across that road, driving down the highway, and there...a guy with a pickup was right across...was also across the ro...on the highway, and his pickup apparently had drowned out in the rain. And he le...
- Q. This is almost right across...this...right across from this house where you...
- A. Yeah, right across from the house which is north of us.
- Q. Yeah.
- A. On the corner. And he had left that pickup there with the hood up, and apparently couldn't get it started so...we noticed that pickup left there. And then we saw the highway patrolman go by and he checked the pickup and kept going, and the highway started to go un...and it just started falling off in huge pieces of concrete. And this highway had all been reinforced, but...but all of this highway to Sturgis--16A--had been reinforced with baskets--wire baskets with rocks in them--about three foot deep all along the banks to prevent the erosion of the highway because this had happened in the last flood in '62 and they had to rebuild it all. But those things just peeled out of there, just like peeling an orange, and that road just started to fall down, and finally there was no passage between there and here. And the highway patrol-

man came back this way and then...and then went again towards Sturgis and we never saw him again. By this time we turned on the Sturgis radio, and they started about the water rising very rapidly in Sturgis and started warning people. And later on in the night, we found that...we heard on the radio that a highway patrolman was trapped on the road here...couldn't get his car out 'cause the bridge had gone out here and...and this section of the road had gone out. So apparently he spent the whole night there. And...and the water just continued to run most of the night. We went to bed about 11:30; we were listening to the radio from Sturgis, and they were talking about the water, and they talked about the fact that the National Guard had been called down from Rapid City to help them with the flood control in Sturgis. My father's clinic is on Main Street in Sturgis, on kind of a low point there, and it had flooded in the past. We tried to call into town, but by then the phones were out.

Q. Did you have electricity?

A. We still had electricity, and then we had propane gas and our own well, so there's no problem there. But the phones were out. So all we could imagine was that they had water in the basement of the clinic, and... but they seemed to be quite concerned about the elevation of the creek, and they talked about the fact that the interstate bridge which--Interstate 90 also crosses that creek right outside of Sturgis, but that was impassable at that point, and they weren't letting anybody go through there; so we knew that it was quite serious. And I guess we went to

bed about, oh, 11:30, 11...maybe 12:30, finally. And by then it...the rain had slowed down quite a bit, and...but the creek was still running pretty fast. But...I guess we decided to go to bed. We...we hadn't heard anything about the Rapid City...

Q. Oh, you hadn't?

A. Not at all. No, there was no mention of it on there...on the Sturgis radio. And in fact, the National Guard from Rapid City were...were coming down, they said, to help the people in Sturgis. And they did talk about this Dead Man Creek running through here, which I guess is shown here on what, the seventeenth square or something, and going through the sixteenth square. And that goes right by my parent's home.. that creek which is dry normally, (referring to the map) they live right here.

Q. Right on Junction Street?

A. Right.

Q. Yeah.

A. They mentioned some water coming down there; and there's a bridge right there, but they said that you could still drive across that bridge. So we were concerned, but not seriously. Another problem was that the hospital is right on that creek also. They were...they were worried about that.

Q. So then, you went to bed thinking that, well, this was something more than usual; but in comparison to '62, did you...?

A. Probably about on the same magnitude as '62, this is about what we

thought...which...which was quite serious and we didn't really know how we were going to get out at...at that point...but...

Q. So then wh...you woke up the next day...when did you first realize that it was something...

A. About 6:30 in the morning. We got up and turned on the radio and started hearing the news from...from Rapid City, which was really stunning, and didn't hear that much more about Sturgis. But it was...apparently had had water damage and they were concerned, but we're pretty much out of danger. By then, the creek had started to...started to go down. And by Sunday morning it had gone down so that it would...I think, at the high point, it was probably running thirty feet deep, though. And at least...

Q. At your spot here?

A. And at least...it musta been at least 200 feet across. And we knew we were stuck, but...that there wasn't any way we could get out that we could figure, for a while...but we had food and everything, so we weren't concerned about that. At least, immediately, particularly when we heard about what was going on in Rapid City.

Q. Now, when did you finally get out?

A. Finally...got across...we got across the road Sunday. There's a...the Bureau of Reclamamtion that built a cable bridge...it's not a bridge, but it's cables suspended between two supports, across the creek around the corner north of the cabin, with a little car that runs across it. And we finally went over there and uct the chain which had been holding

that up and went across on that cable car, and just went out and looked at the highway and so forth. Finally, on...on Monday my brother... two of my younger brothers had gone to Rapid City on Friday night and were stuck up...were stuck in Rapid City with my mother's car, so there wasn't anybody to come out. But we weren't...we...my brother and I knew we could get across the creek, but we couldn't get the rest of the people across the creek. So we thought if we needed food or anything, we wo... we would do that. I think it was probably Mon...Monday afternoon before my brother that had the car got back from Rapid City and we drove out then on...came...went to Spearfish, came around through Deadwood, and came down the canyon as far as he could to about the golf course. And we walked across the road and took the car into town and got groceries and so forth.

Q. So this road was...by that time...

A. Yeah, that road...the road between...starting at our cabin to Sturgis was impassable. There was no way we could have taken it. The Highway Department did come out on Monday and dug a road parallel in the creek, just one lane, so they could get that highway patrolman out of there...

Q. He was there...?

A. Out where he was trapped.

Q. He was there...he was there until Monday?

A. Yeah. Well, his car was there...yeah, so...

Q. Was he there, or do you know?

A. I'm not sure. He mighta been...he mighta gotten outa there Sunday.



Maybe they came...I think maybe they came down on Sunday and did that.

Yeah, I think they did...yeah...Sunday. So he got out on Sunday.

Q. Now, were there any deaths around, or any injuries?

A. No, not in the general area we were in.

Q. Well,...

A. It was just by luck there weren't. We...we were dumb. First of all, we didn't take our cars across the creek onto the highway. Normally, we should have done that. Luckily, we didn't though, because had we a done that, we'd a put 'em in a dumb place with respect to how high that water was gonna get. And we'd a lost both of 'em. Consequently, my car is still out there, and I don't know when I'm gonna...when I'll get it back. But we'll...we'll get a road out there.

Q. When you left, how...how high was the creek?

A. Oh, it was down. It was down to maybe twice as high as it normally runs--which isn't very high. But, the new channels that had been cut, for example, if it was...if it was about a channel of probably five foot wide and four foot deep, right at...right at the edge of the creek, where we usually start to drive across. So somewhere...we're gonna have to build a bridge in there, and we'll get a caterpillar in and dig a new trail.

Q. Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW