

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of Informant Meade Corwin
Address Box 616, Rt. 4, Rapid City, South Dakota (Braeburn Addition)
Date of Interview July 9, 1972
Name of Researcher Stephen R. Ward
Others Present Bert Corwin (son)
Location of Interview Bert Corwin residence, Valentine Street
Added Notes Mr. Corwin lost his entire family in the flood.

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

Destruction of home in Braeburn Addition; Crawled on roof, swept down creek, circled Canyon Lake three times before going over dam, held onto tree and survived break of Canyon Lake Dam.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 68 Sex Male County Pennington

Socio-economic status Upper Middle

Occupation Farmer

Education _____

Religion _____

Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota _____

Where? _____

From Where? _____

Number of Moves in South Dakota _____ Reasons for moves: _____

- Q. ...see how we're going. This is Stephen Ward talking to Mr. Meade Corwin on July 9, 1972, Mr. Corwin's address at the time of the flood was the Braeburn Addition, address in particular is on the demographic form. The location for geographi...from geographical standpoint is the southeast quarter of the southwest quarter of Section 8, Township 1 North, Range 7 East. Well, let's begin by talking about what you, what you were doing on the night of June 9th, Friday night of the flood.
- A. Well, I finished up, I was out to the ranch, and drove in, got in about 7:30, 8:00. And just, the family was eating supper, so I just got out and had supper with them. And the TV was running, and they said that it rains, we might expect a four foot rise on the creek. And after supper, why, a neighbor, Don Taylor, drove up and we could hear Cleghorn Canyon roaring so we walked over there.
- Q. About what time was that?
- A. That was about 9 o'clock, I think. And we watched it flow, it stayed under the bridge but it was tearing right along. And pretty quick it went down. And so we thought, well, that's where the high water was, on Cleghorn Canyon, 'cause we hadn't had any water. So then we walked back and my wife met me and said that the sewer had backed up. And so I went...I had a plug to plug it, and went down and saw that it wasn't hurting the basement, we had a sump pump that took care of it. And then we walked down in the creek which is east of my buildings and several of the neighbors was down there, and the creek had only come up just a few inches, just nothing to worry about at all. And the TV was still showing only a four foot raise, which is maybe about 15 feet below my house, so-in fact everybody else's, nobody was, had anything to worry about,

'cause we'd all had the creek come up more than that and just seepage in the basement is all we had. And so the neighbors just all went back to the house--some of them to go to be and the like; and I know I come back and Don's mother lived in the trailer house just north of me, why, he said, "You'd better come up and stay with us the nigh," And she said, "No, if it stays all right, I'll stay here." So Don got in his car and went home. I walked in the house and was leaning against the door looking at the TV and all of a sudden I looked out east and I could see the water starting to go down the street. Just then my daughter called, and...

Q. Excuse me, what street was that?

A. That was the street right in front of the house.

Q. Which is what street?

A. Well, it's what would be that Jackson Boulevard, see..

Q. Let's look here on the map.

A. That's the only one there.

Q. Yeah, okay.

A. And, 'course then my daughter called, and I started down--she was in the basement bedroom--and as I started down the steps the water burst the west and south windows of the basement in, just tore the casings out. So I got her upstairs and I knew we was in trouble then, so I smashed a hole in the ceiling above the cabinet in the kitchen, my mother-in-law was in the bedroom upstairs, and I went in to get her and as I walked in to get her, the water had come up so fast it was coming up through the floor of the house. The TV was still on, and they was still saying a four foot raise. Well, they were off about 20, 30 feet by

then. And then although our, the water come up so fast, and although our switchboxes were all in the basement, they hadn't shorted yet. But they shorted then. I picked up my mother-in-law and carried her into the kitchen to... and put her up in the attic-or what there was of an upstairs-and as I come down through the hole, the water was about four or five inches from the ceiling. It had come up that fast.

Q. Now we're only talking about a...

A. A few minutes. That's...it was just a wall hit the house, you see, and the water just engulfed it. And you could hear the building falling apart, you know, the stuff hitting it and the stuff.

Q. Now from the structural point of view is your house, was it a two story, was it...

A. It was a one story house, but it had a, I knocked a hole in the ceiling so I could get into what attic there would be up there, you see. It was just a place to get higher.

Q. Yeah, all right.

A. Because the water was running on the outside up on the doors a long ways by that time. And it had come up and, of course, my wife and daughter when I come down, I knew they were gone, and just then the pressure, it filled the room to the ceiling, and the pressure then just shot me up in the, or helped me get up in the hole. And I was facing to the, what would be the north where my garage hooked on to the house. And there was a wrench, and just then it opened up. The roof just left. And I was on...just split the house.

Q. The roof of your garage or the roof of your house?

- A. Well they, it split, see, it's all one piece, and it just split there where it come together. And I was looking out on another roof, a little lower. So I just crawled out on that. Then I was on my way.
- Q. You were on your way.
- A. And I, I rode that down, and I was going right toward the fish hatchery building and I thought I could maybe get off on that, but the water, current of the water kept away, so I didn't make that.
- Q. About how big is this roof?
- A. Oh, I couldn't tell, it was just a piece of a roof that just made a raft, it was, wasn't too big.
- Q. Did you observe anything around you-people, other buildings?
- A. Well, going down through there I was going so fast and I was getting my, I had a pair of boots on, I kicked them off so that they wouldn't get me in trouble. And you was going too fast to see anything. You could see lights out on the road, but it was just minutes, I think, the water was going so fast. It's about a, oh, it isn't a mile down there, probably three-quarters of a mile, and...
- Q. To the fish hatchery.
- A. To the fish hatchery. We went pretty fast. And I went around that, and then we come to the, where the bridge was on the west side of Canyon Lake. There's a whirlpool there and I lost my roof and went down through the whirlpool, and when I come out of that, I come into some debris and climbed up on that, and here was a, part of a side of a house, made a raft for me, I climbed up on that and then it took off. And then I...
- Q. This whirlpool, how big of a distance around would you say? Or across, perhaps.

- A. Oh, it was pretty big, I think. I could see it as I come, you know, the water and the whirling. It was probably the water going around and under this bridge or what was left of it, I don't know what it was, but...
- Q. And you just went down into it.
- A. Well, when we come over, why, the force of the water just threw me off the roof. I don't know, the roof went one way and I went the other. And I was on my own down through there. And then when I got on this raft, why, I rode around the lake, I just think I circled the lake a couple of times or three, I don't know. But everytime I'd get further east. And there was some people out on the lake with flashlights. But I was so close to that spillway or where the water was going over the dam, that they didn't dare come over there, I don't think, if they could have. But they might have had a boat, I don't know. But I always kind of thought they might have had a boat.
- Q. Had the dam gone?
- A. No. But, so I think I went over the, then I got over and just whang, you could see way down, it looked like a long ways the water was going over the dam. And then I lost my raft there, and it socked me clear down into the, I remember being clear down on the ground on the other side of the water.
- Q. You went over the dam?
- A. Oh, yeah. And then I'd come up and get a little air, and then I'd go down, several times. And I'd a sold out pretty cheap a time or two, but anyway I come up and I grabbed a log and went down into the park, kind of toward the northeast corner-not clear to the corner-but I come by a tree and got ahold of it and swung in, debris was about three or four foot high around every tree in

there. And I swung in and I could stand there and my arms around the tree and the water was around my neck and shoulders, about that high. Then that, then I kind of come to, I was about half knocked out by then. And then I started getting cold and the water's bad, so then I thought, well, if I climb up on this debris and I can lean against the tree and be all right. I was afraid I'd fall down or something in the water.

Q. Did you have the force of the water on the other side, in other words the tree was blocking...

A. It was blocking, the debris and the tree was giving me protection, you see. So I climbed up, the tree didn't have any branches, but I climbed up the tree and got my feet up on top of this debris, and then I just got around and leaned against the tree with my back to the, where the current would be. And it was awful cold. It'd rain once in a while and that'd warm me up, then...

Q. The rain warmed you up?

A. The rain warmed me up. It was colder without the rain. And then all of a sudden I kind of heard some noise, and then the water hit, I think that's when the dam went out. And the dam went clear over my head, I pretty near lost it a time or two there, I couldn't get my breath.

Q. Okay. Is it too much to ask you, do you have any idea what, how long you were in this tree before you thought the dam went?

A. I don't think it was very long. I, I think the house broke up somewhere around 10:20, 10:30, and I know I got over on the, got out of the thing around 11:30, so I think the dam went out some time around 11 o'clock, 11:10 or something like that.

- Q. So you were one of the few people that were actually, sort of in the vicinity of the dam perhaps.
- A. Yeah, I couldn't say exact, 'cause you don't know, but, but it didn't take me too long to come down through and go through the, the whirlpool and go over the spillway or the dam, whatever I did.
- Q. Would you figure that the time or the speed of the water was something in, could you estimate miles per hour?
- A. Oh...
- Q. From Braeburn to Canyon Lake...did, would you say 30 miles an hour did you travel, or was there, was that...
- A. Well, I'd say 20, 30 mile an hour, we moved right along. And that's what tore everything up so bad was, was the force of the, speed of that water.
- Q. Okay, so you're in this tree, you felt that the dam had broken...
- A. Well, I didn't know whether, I never thought about , can...all I could think about was Pactola was going out. But this extra water, well, I was kind of hazy then, I don't know, but I just hung onto the tree, and the water would sometimes get, go over my head, but it raised, you see, six-five, six feet from what it was before when I was down standing on the ground. So it was a lot more water. And the tree kept leaning over, and what I was afraid of was the tree would...it was just tearing trees out.
- Q. What kind of a tree was it?
- A. It was a Ponderosa Pine. It was a good one. And...but anyway, after awhile that tree'd keep a laying and then it'd sway back, and then it'd go down as-the water kind of pulsed back and forth like, it seemed like. Anyway, after awhile

the water started going down, then I see it was down below the debris around there, by that time I was awful cold and I knew I couldn't hang onto that tree much longer. So I climbed down and got in the water, it was about knee deep. Well, you could see Jackson Boulevard, and there was trees kind of lined up across, towards there, with debris around each one, and I got ahold of a pipe and I put it in the ground good and then get through that water where it was flowing between the trees, over to the next street. Then I'd rest up and make it to the next one, and...

Q. The water was still very swift...

A. Oh, yeah, but it was only about knee deep, so if you set your feet tight and with this pipe I picked up, I could brace myself.

Q. Can I back you up just a second? You said you were on top of the debris, and you got this terrific water that went over your head...

A. Head, yeah.

Q. But only lasted for a very short period of time.

A. I don't think it was very long, but it seemed a long time, of course, but, but...

Q. But you were under water.

A. But I'd be under there, I'd be pretty near out of breath, and then, you know, the tree would raise up or the water would go down enough so I'd get my breath again, just kind of come and went.

Q. Then all of a sudden the water was down to your knee.

A. It just started, then all of a sudden it just started dropping, just...see, the dam went out and went over the top and then, and when that big bunch went, then it just slowed down.

Q. All right.

A. But I...but it never entered my head about Canyon Lake, all I could think was Pactola was to blame for the whole...but I did think this next run of th water up the river, creek aways, there'd been a blockage and that had let loose, and give us this second run of water.

Q. Second run.

A. Well, what I meant, to me it was a second run was when, what I thought was...

Q. The first run was at your house and the second...

A. Yeah. And then this one down here I couldn't figure out what raises-a fellow is hazy-I thought, well, something blocked it up above there and here come another bunch of water down the creek. But that must have been when Canyon Lake went out. Because I know it was muddy water and the like-when they, when I got home, I know after I got out and up on Jackson...

Q. Would you explain how you got out, you were going from tree to tree when we last left to back up.

A. Well, see, I, it just happened I was lucky enough, right close to me was a pipe about four, six inches diameter, about four foot long. And I'd slip that in the water, reach out in swift water, then I'd work around it to the next tree. And I knew I was close to that little lake there in the norhteast corner, I was afraid...and I was right alongside of it. If I reached out too far the pipe would, there was no bottom. And just at the last thing I thought I had it made, and there I fell in there where they got a ditch running to feed water into this little lake just south of Jackson there. But I fell across and got on the other side, then I had her made, the current let down and it was just a little

ways to walk, then I walked up on Jackson. And then I walked down the street about, I don't think it was a block, about half a block, probably.

Q. Which way?

A. East. And a guy had some lights at the house. And he had a camping outfit and name was Everetts-he works for Rapid Chevrolet. And he, he had some gas lanterns. That give him about the only lights in the territory. And so I knocked there and they took me in and I must have been amighty mess all the way around, and they just put some blankets on the bed and rolled me in and covered me up, and I shivered for a long time, I thought I'd never get warm. They done all they could, but they didn't have any lights or electricity for warm. for electric blankets or anything. But they said my pants, the pockets was full of mud. The water's went down through and then left the mud in the pockets. So I must have gotten most of that when the dam went out, I suppose. But I, I sure mud-died up their blankets, I know that. I was just a ball of mud. Well, then, they started calling for Bert, and, of course, the phone service was bad and about 3 o'clock they quit and then they started in the morning. And finally they called, I'm sure it was his mother in North Rapid and then she called, she got a phone call through to the house here. And then he come and got me.

Q. This si your son.

A. So that was it, yeah.

Q. Your tour around Canyon Lake kind of interests me, the...in other words the force of the water was driving you in a kind of circular motion around the edge of Canyon Lake?

A. Well, after I got out of that, got on this raft on the lake, it must, it must

have been kind of circling in the lake, the force. See the lake was bigger and it was circling around, I suppose, building up before it started over that, over the dam part and washed it out, I s'pose. But I know I made kind of a circle or two around the lake, I can't say just how, but...

Q. And you saw people, or you saw lights...

A. I saw some lights and you could see cars and, you know, in the distance and things; but it wasn't doing me any good out there on the lake. And it was, must have been an awful roar, I know you could holler and stuff, but you couldn't hear anybody or I don't think they could hear me either, as far as that goes.

Q. The roar of the falls?

A. Well, I think just the debris and water and then when it got over the falls, why, the roar of the falls and stuff.

Q. Did you, did you go over the, over the falls on anything or did you just go over by yourself?

A. Well, I, you know, it was just like when there...with the roof, when I got to the edge of the whirlpool it just flipped and give me a throw, and that's what the, my raft did when I went over the falls, and I could just see down there, it looked like an awful long ways, just black down there where the water was shooting down. And I was on my way.

Q. Evidently you must have fallen then, what, about 10 feet, 15 feet.

A. Over the falls?

Q. Over the falls.

A. I don't know, see...

Q. The water must have been up under the...

- A. The water, I was in that swift current as it went over and I just went over with it, but I, I can remember I went clear down and, and I was down on, in mud down to the bottom, and I thought it'd never get loose so I'd get back up, the water just kind of held you there for a little while. And then, I don't know, the force of water must have shoved me along until all of a sudden up I went and got a gulp of air and then it sucked me back down again. I don't know how many times, several times.
- Q. Are you a good swimmer?
- A. Well, I'll tell you what I think helped me. When I was a kid, I was raised north of Mitchell, Forestburg, Jim River, and whenever I had any time I played in that Jim River. And I think it paid off that night.
- Q. It must have been. Did, was your house totally wiped out?
- A. Oh, yes. All that's left was the, just the basement and the trees, it was kind of on a slope, so there wasn't much debris around, it just left the trees and the like, but there wasn't a thing left of the house except some brick, it was a brick house and there was some brick there.
- Q. It was a brick house?
- A. Yes.
- Q. And it went.
- A. I'll say it did. It just exploded. That water was bigger than the house and it just come in and just raised it.
- Q. What happened to your, you mentioned earlier your neighbors to the north in the trailer.
- A. She, she was, as Don got home, soon after he got home, he looked down and seen

his mother go. See the trailer going, and she was holding a flashlight at the window, and then something hit it, and it was absolutely gone.

A2. Well, I heard that it floated away into some trees and her flashlight was still on, and then Stan Bice's house broke loose and hit the trailer and then that was...

Q. That was it?

A2. That was it, yeah. But she was alive when it lodged in the trees, 'cause she had a flashlight, and it was still on...but Stan Bice lived on west of Dad, and he was up on the road, and he'd just got out. And they watched his house go down and hit the trailer.

A. What I think happened that saved me, when I sot up there in the attic-or whatever you'd call it up there-the roof broke and the part I was in, the water had raised it up, and this other was lower, giving me a chance to crawl out. Been opposite, I'd never made it. But everything just happened just right there or I'd never got out of there.

Q. Well, I had had the impression from looking around that...well, there's, there is a brick house on Canyon Lake Drive right next to the creek just as, just behind Baken Park. Maybe you know which one it is, it's on the right side.

A. Baldwin's.

A2. Baldwin's.

Q. Now it, it's still standing, and I don't know, I just looked at that and I thought maybe brick held, but here, this shoots that.

A. Well, see, my house was right in direct line with the whole creek bed, and that's where it come down through. And there were other houses up there breaking and

falling apart. There was things hit our house, you could feel the thud and the like, and so I don't think anything could have stood up under all that banging. The houses to the south where the trees are heavier, and where the current wasn't so strong-those old houses-they're still standing. But you see, they had the trees a-helping them, they had big fir trees that helped a lot, and then they were out of the main current. And that saved them. Now, the house just west of me, Emey's house, was just a little bit north of the current.

Q. Whose house?

A. Emey.

Q. How do you spell that?

A. Owen Emey. E-M-M...E-Y, isn't it? E-M-E-Y, yeah. But anyway, he had a big two-story house, it was a big layout. And the current kind of hit that and then right straight into my house. It was just a little on the north of the main current. Because the house west of him and the house west of that, they're still standing-all those. They weren't in the main current. But the, a man by the name of Rau had a house on the corner and then Bice and then come Caldwell and right in that circle-we was right in line, it wiped out every one of those houses, took every one. Well, they were hit before mine, so probably some of those, that debris was coming down with a lot of force hitting mine, too.

Q. Did you have something to add, Dr. Corwin? You were going to add something I thought.

A2. Well, I think Dad answered it, I, I think the reason the house went was where the most force and debris was. Now, a brick house or a more solid house may

have stayed longer, but I think the main thing was what, where the main force was or what log or bridge or so on was in the way, and some houses had trees or something to protect it or another house protected it. It may be a house wasn't made as well or there is rumors that some of them weren't bolted down or something like this. But I think basically it's just where the mainstream of water, how it dammed up, see, this debris would dam up and it'd run around here and it'd run around there and take out one house and leave another. And of course Dad's house...you see, the creek has a bend to the south, and the creek just cut right straight across.

A. You can see it there on the map, it just come right...

A2. Yeah, you look at it, his house is right in direct line.

A. Here's his house.

Q. Oh, that's his house.

A2. You can see the way the trees are. This is the Emey house he was talking about. But that's Braeburn.

A. But you see, that water come and it was coming in the bottom windows, and it just forced, it just... and it was higher was high. And so it just forced the roof right off, just...and the other stuff, it just tore it to pieces.

A2. One thing back there where Dad was talking about this whirlpool, I wondered if that wasn't the bridge going out to Jackson Park, just as you go into the lake, and you went over that bridge. There's a whirlpool, kind of...

A. Yeah, well, that's what I say, on the west side of Canyon Lake where the wooden bridge went across, that's where I found the whirlpool. I think water was going under and over and everything with that. Well, then, when I come out, there's

a lot of debris. Well, you can see just south there where the bridge was, there's a whole bunch of cars and junk left there, and I think that's where I come out of the thing and got up on this, what I call this raft, the side of a house. Well, just as soon as I got on it and put some weight on it, the current was underneath, it took off. Everytime I'd get on something, away it'd go. I couldn't keep anything still. But if I'd a got up on that debris and could have walked on across, I might have made it south into the old, into that area south of the lake.

A2. Jackson Park.

A. Jackson Park.

Q. Yeah.

A. But just as soon as I got on that, bang, away I went.

Q. There's one thing before we run out here,...you said that you went down and checked the creek and then you came back to your house and what, can you give an estimate in terms of time elapsed, what time elapsed from...because obviously you were caught without warning.

A. Yeah.

Q. And would you say it was five, ten, fifteen minutes.

A. From the time I went down to the creek?

Q. Creek..

A. Until it hit us.

Q. Until it hit.

A. It couldn't have been over 15 minutes, I know.

Q. What I'm essentially trying to figure out is from safe time to...

- A. Yeah, because when we were down at the creek and we...I just walked up and, and I visited with a guy coming up, that young...
- A2. Thomas.
- A. ...Thomas. And then I, he went in the house and I went in the house, and I couldn't have stood there very long and Thomas's then tried to make it out, but they got caught on the way out. The girl made it, but the man and wife, they had, they had a Lincoln and they lost it, and the boy was behind them strapped in his car, and, of course, he got caught, too. But I know it couldn't have been-from the time we was down at the creek, it couldn't have been over 15 minutes 'til we, we were gone.
- Q. Okay, well, thank you very much. One last point, we just figured out that Mr. Corwin went approximately something over a mile in his travels.

(END OF INTERVIEW)