

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Name of informant Tom Oliver  
Address 3860 Riverdell, Rapid City, South Dakota  
Date of interview June 29, 1972  
Name of Researcher J. Watterson  
Others Present \_\_\_\_\_  
Location of Interview Social Science and Languages Building, School of Mines, Rapid City  
Added Notes \_\_\_\_\_

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

*Rate of rise of the water; Swept down Franklin Drive by water;  
Took refuge <sup>root of</sup> ~~Spent the night~~ on a garage; wife's experiences; Search for his  
wife; Comments on Holy workings*

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 49 Sex Male County Pennington

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

Occupation Professor, Electrical Engineering, S.D. School of Mines

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

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

- Q. June 29, 1972, this is John Watterson, I'm talking with Mr. Tom Oliver who lived, what was the address?
- A. 3860 Riverdale Drive.
- Q. 360?
- A. 38.
- Q. 3860 Riverdale Drive, which is in the northeast quarter of the southwest quarter of section 9, township 1 north, range 7 east. You can just, why don't you just \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Very good. We were aware, throughout the evening, of course, of heavy rains and the fact that the creek was rather high. I think we got misled, because up to a certain point, although the creek was high, the rate of rise was extremely slow, maybe it would rise a foot in an hour and so naturally my wife and I figured well, if the time ever comes, there's no problem getting out, you know. And so I guess all the early part of the evening, whatever concern we had was for. . . was for taking precautions so as to minimize the damage based on the rising water. In other words, we visualized the possibility of maybe a little water in the basement, and that was about all.
- Q. You were watching the water from, from your house?
- A. We, we went out and looked at the, at the creek every so often, we couldn't help but be aware of the fact that it was rather high, tremendous amount of the water going over the spillway and quite a raging torrent going down the spillway in the normal course of the, of the creek. But still, this was, this was in the creek bed and not enough to do any damage.
- Q. About how far were you actually, your house located from the creek itself?
- A. From the main creek there was only one other house between my house and the,

and the main creek. Actually, my house had a branch of the creek that formed part of the border of our back yard. You, you can see that branch on the map, here, of course. Part of the border between us and Canyon Lake Park was this, this off shoot of the creek. It was part of the whole set-up of Canyon Lake Park, I guess they let water out and had it going in several streams through the park, made the park very attractive, and then one of these lesser streams formed the boundary between my backyard and the park. It might have, at least, before the flood, it made that one of the extremely desirable lots in Rapid City, as you could look out the backyard and see the ducks on the duck pond and see the kids playing in the park, and all that sort of thing. And it was really, at that time, nobody worrying about floods, that was really a premium location. Well, as I say, we were aware of the rising water throughout the evening, but it was rising slowly and we didn't, we didn't really think of personal danger. It got up to the point where it was beginning to seep into the basement and still (somehow) my main concern was to saw a couple of little boards and nail them across the vents leading into the crawlspace into our house which was going to minimize the rate at which the water could seep into the basement. And about the time I finished doing that, it must have been. . . I can't spot the time we got the warning over the radio to get out immediately, that it was gonna get much worse. So, my wife and I got in, oh, I might say that I went out to move my wife's little Dodge Dart out of the way because it was, it was in the driveway in such a position that it would block my truck, and I figured the truck was the better vehicle to get out in. I think the water was about up to my ankles as I moved that Dodge out of the driveway, and by the time I could get my wife in the truck and start moving it, the water was



up above my knees. It was rising that rapidly at this point in time. There was a . . . just a sudden increase in the rate of rise of the water there. We, so we started driving out in this pick-up with a camper on it and we got about halfway down Riverdale trying to get to Jackson Boulevard, the engine drowned out on account of the water. We got to this corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive, and at that point there must have been half a dozen cars in front of me all stalled out on account of the water on 38th Street blocking any further progress toward Jackson Boulevard, at least in the vehicle. Now, my department head and good friend, Professor Bill Hickson was in a car right in front of us. I could see his Buick right in front of where I stood at the corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive and he had just picked up off of Riverdale Drive his mother, and the man she was married to, Mr. Paul Thompson. Bill's father had died and so his mother was remarried. And I knew these two old folks were in his car. And I saw him out in the water trying to do something, push the, push the Buick or I'm not sure what. So my first thought, I still, I still didn't recognize personal danger to myself or my wife. I figured, well, the thing to do is get out there and help him. So, I opened the door of the truck and jumped out into the water; about the time I hit that water I knew I wasn't going to help anybody 'cause I got washed across 38th Street, just forced by the current, washed across 38th Street and managed to grab a telephone pole on the corner and hung on to that, both arms around it, hugging it for dear life. My pick-up truck with the camper on it and my wife called out to me, "What should I do, should I get out?" And I don't know, where I stood at the time it looked, the cab of the truck looked like a better place than where I was, so I told her, "No, stay in there."



So in a minute or so the whole truck with my wife in it got washed down Franklin Drive. It wasn't very long before I had the decision \_\_\_\_\_ hanging on to that telephone pole any higher, the water was rising, it was, it was splashing into my face from the pile up in front of the pole. The current was so strong, I guess the basic water depth was up to my chest somewhere. But it wasn't getting any better, I couldn't see any way of climbing the pole, so I figured, well, I, I just got to do something else. So I let go of the pole and got washed straight down Franklin Drive, the current seemed to be going straight down Franklin, as I recall I went right down the middle which I didn't really like at the time, I'd liked to have been off to the side somewhere where I could grab something, but where I got washed there was nothing to grab. A case like this, people that haven't been through it kind of think about swimming, and Gee, you're just not swimming, you're trying to keep your head above water and that's about all. . . .

Q. Can you guide yourself at all?

A. Maybe to a slight extent. But not very much, that current takes you where it wants to, or you might get a, by great effort you might get a few feet to one side or the other side compared to where it's taking you, but really, there's so little control, it's, I think it's hard to imagine unless you've been in it.

Q. Were you being struck by debris?

A. No, fortunately, I wasn't, and was lucky there. This is, I'm sure this is what a number of people killed in the flood, I'm sure this is what did it, because in a case like that if you got hit by something and knocked out, that would just be the end.

Q. Would you say that this was before or after the dam broke?

A. I think this is probably before the dam broke, but probably water was pouring over the top of it by this time, point in time. I've subsequently talked to Leonard Swanson and looked at, oh, the most authoritative guesses available as to when the dam actually broke, and this would be my best estimate, that I think water was pouring over the top of it, but I don't think it had broken yet. It's hard for me to pinpoint time, see, even though I had my watch on and every so often I looked at it, I just, I didn't think to, well, I couldn't have made any written records if I'd tried to, as wet as everything was. And I didn't. . .somehow at a point in time like that your main concern isn't remembering times, you know, your main concern is figuring out how to stay alive. And so I didn't make accurate mental notes that I'd remember as to exactly what happened when. Well, I was, as I say, washed down Franklin Drive to about this corner in Franklin Drive, and at that point, very fortunately, the current sort of took me square on into a wide garage, it was built of bricks. I remember, seem to remember it had three doors facing me, in other words, I was taken right toward the middle of the three door garage. Well then, right in front of the garage, of course, the, the current had to split and the water was a little bit less strong, a little bit of slack water there so to speak, \_\_\_\_\_ the current was trying to wash me around the, the right hand edge of the garage. And had it done so, I'd have been right in the main course of Rapid Creek which as you can see here on the map, the Rapid Creek, here, goes right by this corner of Franklin Drive \_\_\_\_\_ right, the map doesn't even show room for it, but right about here is where that garage is. So I got carried right in front of the garage \_\_\_\_\_. I managed to

grab a garage door handle, my right hand and for a few seconds it seemed like it was all I could do just to hang on to that garage door handle \_\_\_\_\_ force of the, the current was so great. Somehow I managed to get myself back up on my feet. And that makes a tremendous difference, if you're down in that fast moving water you, you're just virtually helpless, but once you get back up on your feet, it made it a totally different story. Then if I was able to keep my foot in, and lean into it and all that sort of thing, had some degree of control again, I suppose the water here was up well over my knees, close to my thighs.

Q. Now you were hanging onto the garage as you pulled yourself up.

A. Yeah. After I got myself up I didn't necessarily have to hold the garage anymore in order to stay put \_\_\_\_\_. Okay, my next thought was to get up on that garage roof, I didn't have too much choice as to what to do, you know. You can't, seems like you can't get very far and the garage was sort of a haven of safety because the water was a little slack right in front of it, although it was still moving. So my thought was to get up on top of the garage. Well, I groped around and somehow stumbled across a, seemed like a block of concrete, maybe two and a half feet on the side, and still don't know to this day what it was, 'cause it was down under, completely under the muddy water, and all I could do was feel it, I couldn't see it. I have a feeling it was heavy enough that I couldn't possibly have moved it if it hadn't been under water. And fortunately it was heavy enough the water didn't wash it away. It seemed to have a big hollow hole in it, I'm thinking it may have been some kind of planter. I could, since this was under water, I could manipulate it by tumbling it side over side, and I put this block of concrete just



where I wanted it. And stood up on top of it, which meant I was up to about my ankles in water, stood up on top of it and tried to swing myself up on the roof. Well, I got my hands gripping the, the edge of the roof, there's a big overhang to this roof, now, got my hands on it, swung one leg up and over and then I couldn't get any farther. Since it was a big overhang, there's nothing to push against and everything's all wet, and it seemed like there was just no way. So I got back down on my block of concrete and looked around and thought a bit, just across the. . .not really across the street, maybe twenty feet away, there was a brick house under construction, a couple of long pieces of two by six projected out from that house. It may have been some sort of a ramp going into the door of the house. So, I decided I'd better risk it and managed to work my way across the current to the end of one of those two by sixes, it was nailed on to something including the house, but by wrenching it around, I managed to break it loose, I'm sure the current was helping me do that, too. Broke this two by six loose, carried it back across to my garage location, tumbled my block to the right place so I could put one end of the two by six on top of the block, the other end of the two by six on top of the roof and crawled up the two by six to get on the garage roof. So, really, from there on I had a grandstand seat. I watched trailers float down, houses float down, cars float down, kind of surprised me how nicely a car floats. . . .

Q. Did you see people who were being washed down or \_\_\_\_\_ trailers. . . ?

A. I didn't actually see any people, now, you have to remember this is night, dark, noisy. . . .

Q. Hear people screaming?

A. I'm not really aware at this time of any screams. I saw my truck float by with

my camper on it, low in the water and naturally pretty worried about my wife. Well, about three houses, three or four houses in my immediate vicinity got torn loose from their foundations, quite a, quite a sound, never heard anything like it. Creaking, grinding, groaning of timbers, finally the house snaps loose, noise quits and floats away free. A few days ago I was at a meeting, informal meeting, gathering, one of the local architects was saying, "Well, if, if all these houses had just had the proper bolts to bolt them to the foundation, the damage would have been a great deal less." I was forced to take exception with him, I'm an engineer myself, those houses I heard tear loose, a few bolts wouldn't have made any difference.

- Q. I've heard that too, from a number of people who said that the older houses were, were bolted and the newer ones that even where they had bolts they hadn't actually had the \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. I can agree that it might make a difference in a very marginal case, but those houses I saw go, bolts wouldn't have made any difference. I think people get that enamored with the strength of bolts, having seen what that water can do, it. . .well, for example, as I stood there, the brick house across from me which was under construction, the brick walls were all up, it was as strong as it was ever gonna be. I think they, they hadn't yet framed the windows and a few things like that. As I stood there the brick house got quickly washed off its foundations. You look at it today, there's nothing left but a poured concrete foundation, every brick is gone. I was standing on the roof of a brick garage, finally this brick garage gave way and started off its foundation. And, of course, you don't feel too good about that as you're standing on the roof, but there's not a whole lot you can do about it, and I figured, "Well,



if I'm going to float down the stream I'd rather float down standing on top of a garage roof than all by myself." It gives you some protection, I'd say. If that whole garage bangs into a pile of debris or, or something solid, maybe I can get off of it onto something solid, if some debris hits it, at least it's hitting the garage roof and not hitting me. But as luck would have it, it only moved, I suppose, twenty feet or so, hit a clump of trees, and stopped. And I later discovered that underneath that garage roof was a cabin cruiser that somebody had stored in the garage and that held the garage roof up. I don't mean to imply that the cabin cruiser was floating, I'm sure it was standing on the bottom in the mud with the garage, weight of the garage roof on top of it, but it held it up. . .

- Q. But it did, you say, it did, the garage roof did go down slightly?
- A. It went, yeah, it, the elevation dropped quite a bit, but still well above the water, and the thing came to rest against this clump of trees.
- Q. The roof or the garage, the garage. . . ?
- A. This is the roof, really, later, 'course I didn't, I didn't really know what I had under me at the time, standing there in the roof in the dark in the rain, everything else. But later the next day I could see there, there's just no wall left to that garage at all, all that brick wall was just carried away and gone.
- Q. So the boat was supporting you and the boat was lodged against the tree and you were. . . .
- A. Put it this way, the boat was holding everything up. The garage roof was on top of the boat keeping the boat from being completely washed away and smashed; the boat was holding the garage roof up. Garage roof was jammed against a whole



clump of trees which kept it from moving any farther, and in turn, the garage roof sitting on the boat I think is what kept it from being washed farther (than it was). And then, I wasn't so conscious of this at the time, but I could see it the next day, a whole big pile of debris piled up just upstream from this garage roof. I guess the fact it was sitting there invited, oh, just an unbelievable pile of debris from several different houses just all piled in tight there. Well, once that debris pile got well established, I suppose it formed quite a bit of a breakwater.

Q. And how long did you stay up on that roof?

A. I would estimate probably a couple of hours I stayed on the roof.

Q. Till the waters began to recede?

A. Till the water, yeah, I, I didn't make records of times and all so I can't be as definite on this as I'd like to be. I think, oh, maybe one o'clock or so the height of the water peaked out and, or maybe even earlier, and my best guess would be it was about maybe two o'clock in the morning that the water was down enough that I figured I could safely get off the garage roof. It, it wasn't real comfortable up there, I was shivering about as hard as I've ever shivered in my life, shaking wet, of course, and I suppose part of that shivering was emotional, you stand there and not do anything. So, when the water got down enough and the, more than even the, more than the height of the water, really, the strength of the current is the thing that, that I worried about at that time, when both the water and the force of the current seemed to be down enough that it, that it looked safe to get off, relatively safe, I took the lowest corner of the roof and jumped down off it. And, floundered through the water to a, to a house that was on Jackson Boulevard.

This house would be, oh, right about here on the map, fact, you can see it, you can see it to this day, it's a green house on Jackson. I floundered over to this house, there was a man in the house who had been shining a flashlight over in my direction, he'd shine it on me and then he'd shine it on, train it on a couple of trees and then he'd train it on something farther down, alternately, and as I was on this garage roof, I could hear, downstream from me some distance, I could hear a child crying out. He was, as I sort of guesses at the time and later confirmed, he was up in one of these trees that was on downstream from me, and very faintly in the distance I could hear a woman's voice reassuring him. Sort of have to recognize, I didn't make out any words even, particularly the woman's reassuring voice, I didn't even make out any words, but you could just tell from the tone and so on, that this was a voice reassuring the kid. And I later learned that that was my wife.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. That was my wife. She was in a tree farther down.

Q. How had she gone from the trailer, from the truck, to a tree?

A. Well, there's a little story there.

Q. \_\_\_\_\_ story, I don't know.

A. There's a little story there, might as well go and pick up her story. Apparently halfway down Franklin Drive the truck and camper hit a tree. I'm not even sure which side of Franklin Drive it is, somewhere in here. It got out of the middle and hit a tree on the edge. At that point my wife got out of the truck and camper, incidentally, we had a camper with the sliding, big glass sliding door at the rear end of it. And she figured that rather than try to open a side door against the current, and I think this was pretty cool thinking on

her part, she crawled back into the camper. Now we had, we had taken out the back window of the truck and the front window of the camper so we had a, a passageway through there and we filled it in with cloth material so that you could go from, you could crawl through from the cab of the truck into the camper. It was a little tight fit, but she said that particular night, it went pretty easy, there wasn't any problem getting back through that tight fit under the stress. She got back in the camper and then slid open this sliding glass door on the camper which was, I say, pretty cool thinking on here part, because you're not trying to open something against the pressure of the water, you're just sliding it. And apparently it was the back of the truck that had lodged against the tree, so she was right in shape to slip out of the back end of the camper and climb that tree. Well, she was in that tree for awhile; apparently while she was in that tree another car, smacked the truck, knocked it loose from the tree, so camper and car washed down the, washed down the embankment. And, of course, that's when I saw the camper go by low in the water and was, was worried as hell. But, but she was out of it at that point, fortunately. Well, then this tree that she was in, halfway down Franklin Drive got uprooted by the force of the current or by debris hitting it, or both, it got uprooted and washed down. And she hung onto the tree. . . .

Q. With the child?

A. No, she was by herself here.

Q. By herself.

A. By herself. She hung onto the tree, which was, I think, the smart thing to do. Might as well hang onto something solid, instead of be all by yourself, she hung onto that tree. Along with the tree, she got washed over the foundation



of this new house, the new brick house that I mentioned I saw carried off of its foundation. She got washed over that foundation and got some nice bruises on her hip in the process, but fortunately nothing broken. Then she got lodged on her tree and all got close enough to a better tree that she was able to get off that one, climb this, this better tree. Okay, now, it's from this better tree, now, that I heard her reassuring the kid who later turned out to be a little boy, he was. . . .

Q. Same tree, or. . . ?

A. No, this, his story is separate, he was in a nearby tree, it must have been somewhere in between, his tree must have been intermediate between my garage roof and my wife's tree. But I had no way of knowing that this was my wife's voice reassuring the little boy in the intermediate tree. If, if either one of us had hollered at the top of our voice, I don't know if the other one would have recognized it. Because there was such a noise from all that raging water and stuff being torn loose and what not.

Q. So did your, did your wife get down from the tree as the waters began to recede, or how long was she up there?

A. I suspect that she was in the tree probably an hour or so longer than I was on the garage roof, because I got down off the garage roof on my own, floundered through the water over to this house, and then from the house, I, I asked the owners, "Is there anything deeper between here and Jackson Boulevard?" And he assured me there wasn't, so then I walked across the lawn to the house to Jackson Boulevard, say I walked across, probably water up to the knees or higher, but no too bad, walked out to Jackson Boulevard, and, of course, my first thought at this point is, "How do I find out about my wife?" Well,

unbeknownst to me, she was still up in that tree. I might say, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ here at the moment, she was, she and the little boy were rescued by the National Guard. I suppose probably an hour or so after I got down off my tree they came in with boats and so on which is a good thing to have in a case like that, whoever (flounders) out into the water, have a rope around his waist and somebody else back in the better place holding onto the other end of it and so on. They, they rescued her out of her tree and rescued the little boy and, and took them to, I forget whether it was a church or a school they took them to, a sort of an assembly point and from there some, a quite young couple there picked her up and took her to their house and gave her a bath and some dry clothes to put on and that sort of thing, and, and fortunately, that house still had a working telephone, so she called from there to a good friend of ours in, in my department at school, the electrical. . .(end of Reel #1)

- Q. This is John Watterson, continuation, side 2 of the previous tape, June 29, 1972. I'm talking about, talking to Tom Oliver about his experiences in the flood. Okay.
- A. Okay, let's see--and down off the garage roof and over to Jackson Boulevard, now, and my first thought was for my wife, I'd seen that camper float by low in the water, so I waded down Jackson Boulevard as far as the 32nd Street Bridge across Jackson, I'm not sure what I thought I was going to accomplish, but was looking for any trace of the pickup camper or anybody that would have any word of my wife. I didn't see a thing as far as that 32nd Street Bridge, so I turned around and started going back. About this time I met a man with a, with a pickup truck on Jackson Boulevard and he had a radio in the truck, and so I asked him, "How do I go about checking on my wife?" He, he said, "Well,



he'd radio into, whatever his headquarters was and they could try checking missing persons and so on and so forth." So we started, I guess we were both on foot and his truck was a hundred yards or so away, and we started walking back toward his truck. Along the way, incidentally, we saw a body in a pile of debris right alongside Jackson Boulevard, a body of a young girl, I went up and felt to see if there was any pulse there and there wasn't, so, so the, 'course now my friend with the radio truck had to report a body first before he could worry about tracking down missing persons. . . .

Q. Which was sort of unsettling, was it not?

A. Well, I don't know, at that point you're so unsettled anyhow, I'm not sure the, the body, it's not a pretty sight, but I'm not sure it, whether it added that much to the way I felt already or not. But. . . then as we got back to his truck, some people came up and, and desperately wanted a radio call put in to get a, a doctor by helicopter to some area that was otherwise completely inaccessible. 'Course the way it was raining and the darkness of the night and all, one could see a helicopter wasn't going to get in there for some time. At any rate, by this time we have all these other radio calls for his, had so many things for this poor man to do with his radio that, that really were more important than trying to track down my wife, because this was, this was really just looking for information, it wasn't trying to, to save anybody's life. But I sort of got discouraged and walked on down Jackson Boulevard. I'm not sure at this point that some of my actions made a whole lot of sense, particularly in the light of hindsight. At about this point here I am wet to the skin, cold, shivering, and everything else, can't seem to do anything about locating my wife, I thought, "Well, okay. I'll walk, the water's quite



a bit down from what it used to be, I'll just walk back to where my house was, and it was a spit level house and up on the top story I can pull a towel out of the cabinet and dry myself off and get in bed and just wait until it gets light because I'm not going to accomplish anything out here probably until daylight." So started walking back toward my own, own house. Well, it wasn't too bad going back in and along Riverdale Drive, oh, thing tend to get black with debris and everything else, but still I could make my way along Riverdale Drive pretty well to about the, about the corner or my cul-de-sac, and about that point I really got disoriented. Things weren't where they ought to be. And I really got confused. I got so confused I started asking myself, "Well, what's wrong, where did I take the wrong turn, how did I get on the wrong street, it's just doesn't, doesn't seem to be any way of doing it wrong and still. . .I'm somehow, I'm not in the right place." And oh, about here things got worse, about this corner, mud was deep, the water was flowing faster than it had been up on the higher ground. I saw a house that just had the living room wall completely washed away, it was just completely laid open, so I got up and walked into that house. And mud all over the floor, you could see that the water level had been clear up to the top of the kitchen cabinets but now it was down maybe a foot below the level of the basic floor of the house, one-story house.

Q. This was at the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac?

A. This is the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac. And, okay, so I just walked into one of the bedrooms in this house and flopped down on the bed and slept rather fitfully for an hour or two until it, I suppose it was about 4:30 a.m. when it started noticeably getting light out, you could see what was

happening. And so this made a big difference, up to that point I'd been floundering around in the dark and couldn't see anything, contributed to the general disorientation. As it got light I got up, walked out, or got out of the house again, I'm still wading a little water and so on; look down to where my house ought to be and just nothing there. This is the first time that I realized that the house was just completely gone. The house, two houses adjoining it on one side were just completely wiped out, gone. On the other side, the next door neighbor on the other side, his house was still there, but damaged completely beyond repair, but still in the place where it ought to be. To the left of that, oh, about see, about three, the three next houses after that, all of them had been moved off their foundations and damaged beyond repair. They were kind of scrambled around so they weren't where they ought to be, one of them had apparently been swirled around and, and was behind another one. Right next to it, adjoining it and up against it. So I began to understand why I was so disoriented the night before. Well, okay, now I, I waded back out to retrace my steps, waded back out to Jackson Boulevard, down Jackson Boulevard, went up, went up 32nd to West St. Anne, where I have some friends who live up there, I thought surely they'd be high and dry and I'd go up to, it's another man in our department, I thought, "Well, I'll just go up to his house and use his telephone to make the necessary calls now and find out about my wife." Get up to his house and discover that even he had water clear up on his living room floor and basement just absolutely full of water and a mess. But I went in and, his daughter invited me in, I tried to use the telephone, it didn't seem to be working, and so I decided to press on farther, I went on up to another friend's house, on Sterling Street, which is up pretty



high. Happens to be Professor Carl Gruber, from the Electrical Engineering department, went up to his front door and oh, \_\_\_\_\_ they took me in, gave me some dry clothes, poured me a great big double shot of whiskey, and left the bottle standing on the table, and believe me, a drink never tasted so good. I think I downed two double shots of straight whiskey on an empty stomach, and I'm not the man that could usually do that and not be affected but about all it did was counteract the adrenalin a little bit at this time, I think. And it sure felt good. We tried on their phone, which was working, although you'd have to pick up the receiver and wait a long time to get any dial tone and so on, the circuits were so busy, I guess. We tried calling missing persons and didn't really achieve any results. So Dr. Gruber and myself went back down and we walked along Jackson Boulevard, this key area, we figured surely nothing would get past this, this 32nd Street bridge, nothing would get past it alive at any rate, so we concentrated on the area between 32nd Street bridge and, and Franklin Street up here and, oh, we walked in along the edge of the creek here, all the way up. Couldn't see any sign of my pickup truck and, and no, no way of figuring out what had happened to my wife. We did spot the, the fiberglass top to my camper in a debris pile, and I could identify it for sure, that it really was the top to my camper because I had a special fluorescent light on the top of the camper that I built myself, and there it was. Fact, the amazing thing is, this circular fluorescent light bulb was perfectly intact, not broke. Here's the whole camper, smashed, the whole thing, just smashed to bits, and that light bulb somehow survived. Well, we walked back up Jackson and back up West St. Anne, and headed back toward the Gruber's house and about this time, Professor Ron Schmitz was the man my wife had called, he drove by



in his car and hailed us and told me that my wife was safe, and they'd heard from her, and that was about the greatest news I'd heard in a long time.

Well, I, I guess that about completes \_\_\_\_\_ whole thing.

Q. Let me ask you, were you aware at any time of the water which had been released from the breaking of Canyon Lake Dam? In other words, was there kind of a, of an increase in increment to the water, of rapid increment to the water at any given time?

A. Well, from the, from the time that I, from the time that I left the house. . . . (Pause in taping.) Yeah, I'd have to say that from the time that we started trying to evacuate the house the water had been rising rapidly, I certainly was conscious of that. I wasn't aware of any sudden wall of water from the breaking of the dam. I'm sure that it must have added something somewhere and done something to increase the damage, but I'm quite convinced we would have had close to the same amount of damage even had the dam been able to hold, which, of course, is completely impossible, an earth dam with water flowing over the top of it all the way, no matter how well constructed it is, it's gonna go. I, I think it was a well-constructed dam, I agree with authorities on that subject. You can look at the back side of it today and see that water flowed over the top and eroded the back side of it for some time before it went. And I just don't see how you can expect any more out of an earth-filled dam than that. Had the whole dam been poured out of solid concrete, the water still would have gone over the top of it and we still would have had a flood that would have been almost as devastating, I'm sure.

Q. I wonder, perhaps, you were out on the roof of the garage at the time the dam broke, because \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

- A. I'm sure I must have been.
- Q. I've spoken with. . .observed a, a sort of dramatic rise in the water which they attributed to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the dam.
- A. I'm sure I must have been on the roof of the garage, and you can see from the story that things did continue to get worse after I got up there, that was after I got up there houses tore loose and even my garage tore loose, and that big impetus may well have occurred when the dam broke.
- Q. While you were in the water and perhaps even on the roof, was your mind so occupied with thoughts of your own survival that you didn't, that you didn't have time to think about the danger you were in, or did it occur to you that you were kind of working with, with death at this point?
- A. Oh, it certainly occurred to me that I was in grave danger. But I don't know, I've been in grave danger before, I flew bombers during World War II and got shot down once and so I didn't, I didn't. . . .
- Q. So this was not a unique experience for you in that. . . .
- A. No. Fortunately, we don't go through that experience very many times in life, and, and I don't want to belittle it. I felt, myself, I felt quite aware that I was in grave danger, but I, I think I proceeded really, quite logically to try to do everything I could to minimize the danger.
- Q. Yes, you certainly did.
- A. I was extremely concerned about my wife, yet at no point did I see any conceivable way where I could do some great heroic act and do anything to alter her situation, you know, and you see, when your standing on the garage roof and you see the camper float by low in the water and I think it would have been nothing but the height of folly to try to jump off and swim over to it

or anything of that sort.

Q. Have you had any kind of, of nightmares or, or any kind of mental aberrations of any kind since, since this experience. I mean, had it affected, do you feel like you've recovered now, has it affected you at all in your reaction to things in general.

A. No, I don't think. . . .

Q. You recovered pretty quickly \_\_\_\_\_ after the whiskey, and. . . .

A. I think I recovered pretty quickly. . . .

Q. . . .finding your wife, and so on.

A. I have, fortunately, I think, been able to keep my mind busy with, with all the innumerable things that have to be done about getting a new place to live and salvaging what you can.

Q. Where was your house, incidentally? Did you ever locate where your house had been moved to \_\_\_\_\_?

A. \_\_\_\_\_, it was completely demolished, and you'd find a little bit of siding in one debris pile and a little bit of roofing in another debris pile in, in the house, you just wouldn't find \_\_\_\_\_.

Q. Personal possessions all completely destroyed.

A. Oh, almost. We, we picked up a few bits and pieces here and there. We were able to dig out of the mud down in the basement two Japanese (similar) vases unharmed.

Q. This is what you needed.

A. Well, I was very happy to recover those, because they meant something, they had been property of my wife's mother and been in the family and they have a lot of meaning. That's the kind of thing you can't replace with money if, if



the flood washed away a suit of clothes of mine, why, I'm not attached to it, I can go out and buy a new one if I have to, but it's those, the thing I think that, that really hurts and there's no point thinking about it 'cause there's nothing you can do about it but, but you kind of hate the things that you just can't go out and replace for money that, personal items, and, well, the momentos and photograph albums, things you were really attached to that you just can't run out and replace.

- Q. Have you had any kind of feelings about how, the way in which the flood was handled--the preparation or lack of preparation for the flood, the warning or lack of warning at the time of the flood, the, perhaps, lack of flood control, the failure of the flood control in your area, are you. . .do you have any thoughts on that?
- A. I have no great thoughts on the subject. I wouldn't care to cast any criticism. I don't think anybody visualized really seriously the possibility of such a severe flood. When the water was rising I talked to my neighbor, two, two or three doors down, and he said, "Oh, well, it got up about this high in 1962 and then it went back down again, so probably nothing to worry about." I, no, I don't see any point in trying to cast any blame or criticism for, for what went on in the past as far as warning or flood control, either one is concerned. It certainly was an extremely unique situation as far as the rainfall was concerned. I'm sure you know that at some stage of the game, I'm not sure exactly when, they say they closed the gates at Pactola and let no more water out of it. So all this flood came from water down the stream from Pactola Reservoir. Pactola, of course, held. I might say for the future, I think obviously we should learn and set up some kind of flood warning system,

and I certainly am in no position to sit here and say what the answers are, but there should be some sort of a flood warning system, the possibility of some sort of a flood control system should be, should be considered and weighed against the idea of just wiping out all property on the flood plain of the creek. 'Cause at some stage of the game it may be more economical to build a, a flood control dam or dike or sea wall or whatever it takes as compared to trying to just wipe out all that property that's in the flood plain which is, \_\_\_\_\_ would be tremendously costly project.

Q. Some people have advocated \_\_\_\_\_.

A. I guess all these things have been taken into consideration and considered.

#528

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of informant Tom Oliver

Address 3860 Riverdell, Rapid City, South Dakota

Date of Interview June 29, 1972

Name of Researcher John Watterson

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

Location of Interview Social Science and Languages Building, School of Mines, Rapid City

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

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 49 Sex Male County Pennington

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

Occupation Professor, Electrical Engineering, So. Dak. School of Mines

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

From where? \_\_\_\_\_

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

\_\_\_\_\_



JW June 29, 1972, this is John Watterson, I'm talking with Mr. Tom Oliver who lived, what was the address?

TO (3860) Riverdale Drive.

JW 360?

TO 38.

JW 3860 Riverdale Drive, which is in the northesat quarter of the southwest quarter of section 9, township 1 north, range 7 east. You can just, why don't you just

TO Very good. We were aware, throughout the evening of course, of heavy rains and the fact that the creek was rather high, I think we got misled, because up to a certain point, although the creek was high, the rate of rise was extremely slow, maybe it would rise a foot in an hour and so naturally my wife and I figured well, if the time ever comes, there's no problem getting you out, you know. And so I guess all the early part of the evening, whatever concern we had was for , was for taking precautions so as to minimize the damage based on the rising water. In other words we visualized the possibility of maybe a little water in the basement, and that was about all.

JW You were watching the water from, from your house..?

TO We, we wnet out and looked at the, at the creek every so often, we couldn't help but be aware of the fact that it was rather high , tremendous amount of the water going over the spillway and quite a raging torrent going down the spillway in the normal course of the, of the creek. But still, this was, this was in the creek bed and not enough to do any damage..

JW About how far were you actually, your house located from the creek itself?

TO From the main creek there was only one other house between my house and the, and th main creek. Actually, my house had a branch of the creek that formed part of the border of our back yard. You, you can see that branch on the map, here, of course . Part of the border between us and Canyon Lake Park was this, this off shoot of the creek. It was part of the whole set up of Canyon Lake Park, I guess they let water out and had it going in several streams through the park, made the park very attractive, and then one of these lesser streams formed the boundary between my backyard and the park. It

TO might have, at least, before the flood, it made that one of the extremely desirable lots in Rapid City as you could look out the backyard and see the ducks on the duck pond and see the kids playing in the park and all that sort of thing, and it was really, at that time, nobody worrying about floods, that was really a premium location. Well, as I say, we were aware of the rising water throughout the evening, but it was rising slowly and we didn't, we didn't ~~think~~ really think of personal danger. It got up to the point where it was beginning to seep into the basement and still (somehow) my main concern was to saw a couple of little boards and nail them across the vents leading into the crawlspace into our house which was going to minimize the rate at which the water could seep into the basement. And about the time I finished doing that, it must have been, I can't spot the time we got the warning over the radio to get out immediately, that it was gonna get much worse. So, my wife and I got in, oh, I might say that I went out to move my wife's little Dodge Dart out of the way because it was, it was in the driveway in such a position that it would block my truck, and I figured the truck was the better vehicle to get out in. I think the water was about up to my ankles as I moved that Dodge out of the driveway, and by the time I could get my wife in the truck and start moving it, the water was up above my knees. It was rising that rapidly at this point in time. There was a, just a sudden increase in the rate of rise of the water there. We, so we started driving out in this pickup with a camper on it and we got about halfway down Riverdale trying to get to Jackson Boulevard, the engine drowned out on account of the water. We got to this corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive, and at that point there must have been half a dozen cars in front of me all stalled out on account of the water on 38th street blocking any further progress toward Jackson Boulevard, at least in the vehicle. Now, my department head and good friend, Professor Bill Hickson was in a car right in front of us, I could see his Buick right in front of where I stood at the corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive and he had just picked up off of Riverdale Drive his mother, and the man she was married to, Mr. Paul Thompson. Bill's father had died and so his mother was remarried. And I knew these two old folks were in his car. And I saw him out in the water trying to do something, push the, push the Buick or I'm not sure what. So my first thought, I still, I



TO still didn't recognize personal danger to myself or my wife, I figured, well, the thing to do is get out there and help him. So, I opened the door of the truck and jumped out into the water; about the time I hit that water I knew I wasn't going to help anybody cause I got washed across 38th Street, just w/forced by the current, washed across 38th Street and managed to grab a telephone pole on the corner and hung on to that, both arms around it, hugging it for dear life. My pickup truck with the camper on it and my wife in it, started getting washed across the road, as it passed my telephone pole, my wife called out to me "What should I do, should I get out?" And I don't know, where I stood at the time it looked, the cab of the truck looked like a better place than I was, so I told her "no, stay in there." So in a minute or so the whole truck with my wife in it got washed down Franklin Drive. It wasn't very long before I had the decision hanging on to that telephone pole any higher, the water was rising, it was, it was ~~xxxxxx~~plashing into my face from the pile up in front of the pole, the current was so strong, I guess the basic water depth was up to my chest somewhere. But it wasn't getting any better, I couldn't see any way of climbing the pole, so I figured, well, I, I just got to do something else. So I let go of the pole and got washed straight down Franklin Drive, the current seemed to be going straight down Franklin, as I recall I went right down the middle which I didn't really like at the time, I'd like d to have been off to the side somewhere where I could grab something, but where I got washed there was nothing to grab. A case like this, people that haven't been through it kind of think about swimming, and gee, you're just not swimming, you're trying to keep your head above water and that's about all.

JW Can you guide yourself at all?

TO Maybe to a slight extent. But not very much, that current takes you where it wants to, or you might get a, by great effort you might get a few feet to one side or the other side compared to where it's taking you, but really, there's so little control, it's, I think it's hard to imagine unless you've been in it.

JW Were you being struck by debris?

TO No, fortunately, I wasn't, and was lucky there. This is, I'm sure this is what a number



TO of people killed in the flood, I'm sure this is what did it, because in a case like that if you got hit by something and knocked out, that would just be the end.

JW Would you say that this was before or after the dam broke?

TO I think this is probably before the dam broke, but probably water was pouring over the top of it by this time, point in time. And I've subsequently talked to Leonard Swanson and looked at, oh, the most authoritative guesses available as to when the dam actually broke, and this would be my best estimate, that I think water was pouring over the top of it, but I don't think it had broken yet. It's hard for me to pinpoint time, see, even though I had my watch on and every so often I looked at it, I just, I didn't think to, well, I couldn't have made any written records if I'd tried to as wet as everything was and I didn't.. somehow at a point in time like that your main concern isn't remembering times, you know, your main concern is figuring out how to stay alive. And so I didn't make accurate mental notes that I'd remember as to exactly what happened when.

XW Well, I was, as I say, washed down Franklin Drive to about this corner in Franklin Drive, and at that point, very fortunately, the current sort of took me square on into a wide garage, it was built of bricks. I remember, seem to remember it had three doors facing me, in other words, I was taken right toward the middle of the three door garage. Well then, right in front of the garage, of course, the, the current had to split and the water was a little bit less strong, a little bit of slack water there so to speak,

the current was trying to wash me around the, the right-hand edge of the garage, and had it done so, I'd have been right in the main course of Rapid Creek which as you can see here on the map, the Rapid Creek, here, goes right by this corner of Franklin Drive right, the map doesn't even show (room) for it, but right about here is where that garage is. So I got carried right in front of the garage

. I managed to grab a garage door handle, my right hand and for a few seconds it seemed like it was all I could do just to hang on to that garage door handle

force of the, the current was so great. somehow I managed to get myself back up on my feet. And that makes a tremendous difference, if you're down in that fast moving water you, you're just virtually helpless, but once you get back up on your

TO feet, it made it a totally different story. Then if I was able to keep my foot in, and lean into it and all that sort of thing, had some degree of control again, I suppose the water here was up well over my knees, close to my thighs..

JW Now wxyou were hanging onto the garage as you pulled yourself up.

TO Yeah. After I got myself up I didn't necessarily have to hold the garage anymore in order to stay put . Okay, my next thought was to get up on that garage roof, I didn't have too much choice as to what to do, you know, you can't, seems like you can't get very far and the garage was sort of a haven of safety because the water was a little slack right in front of it, although it was still moving. So my thought was to get up on top of the garage. Well, I groped around and somehow stumbled across a , seemed like a block of concrete maybe two and a half feet on the side, and still don't know to this day what it was, bause it was down under, completely under the muddy water, and all I could do was feel it, I couldn't see it. I have a feeling it was heavy enough that I couldn't possibly have moved it if it hadn't been under water. And fortunately it was heavy enough the water didn't wash it awaykx. It seemed to have a big hollow hole in it, I'm thinking it may have been some kind of a planter. I could, since this was under mzxthwater, I could manipulate it by tumbling it side over side, and I put this block of concrete just where I wanted it and stood up on top of it, which meant I was up to about my ankles in water, stood up on top of it and tried to swing myself up on the roof. Well, I got my hands gripping the, the edge of the roof, there's a big overhand to this roof, now, got my hands on it, swung one let up and over and then I couldn't get any farther. Since it was a big overhang, there's nothing to push against and everythings all wet, and it seemed like there was just no way. So I got back down on my block of concrete and looked around and thought a bit, just across the ..not really across the street, maybe twenty feet away, there was a brick house under construction, a couple of long pieces of two by six projected out from that house. It may have been some sort of a rampxgix going into the door of the house. So, I decided I'd better risk it and managed to work my way across the current to the end of one of those two by sixes, it was nailed on to smmething including the house, but by wrenching it around, I managed



TO to break it loose, I'm sure the current was helping me do that , too. Broke this two by six loose, carried it back across to my garage location, tumbled my block to the right place so I could put one end of the two by six on top of the block, the other end of the two by six on top of the roof and crawled up the two by six to get on the garage roof. So, really, from there on I had a grandstand seat, I watched trailers float down, houses float down, cars float down, kind of surprised me how nicely a car floats...

JW Did you see people who were being washed down or trailers..

TO I didn't actually see any people, now, you have to remember this is night, dark, noisy..

JW Hear..people <sup>SCREAMING</sup> speaking?

TO I'm not really aware at this time of any screams.. I saw my truck float by with my camper on it, low in the water and naturally pretty worried about my wife. Well, about three houses, three or four houses in my immediate vicinity got torn loose from their foundations, quite a, quite a sound, never heard anything like it. Creaking , grinding, groaning of timbers, finally the house snaps loose , noise quits and floats away free. A few days ago I was at a meeting, informal meeting, gathering, one of the local architects was saying "Well, if, if all these houses had just had the proper bolts to bolt them to the foundation, the damage would have been a great deal less. I was forced to take exception with him, I'm an engineer myself, those houses I heard tear loose, a few bolts wouldn't have made any difference.

JW I've heard that too, from a number of people who said that the older houses were, were bolted and the newer ones that even where they had bolts they hadn't actually had the

TO I can agree that it might make a difference in a very marginal case, but those houses I saw go, bolts wouldn't have made any difference. I think people get that enamored with the strength of bolts, having seen what that water can do , it...well, for example as I stood there , the brick house across from me which was under construction, the brick walls were all up, it was as strong as it's-ever-gonna-be was ever gonna be. I think they they hadn't yet framed the windows and a few things like that. As I stood there the brick house got quickly washed off its foundations. You look at it today, there's



TO nothing left but a poured concrete foundation, every brick is gone. I was standing on the roof of a brick garage, finally this brick garage gave way and started off its foundation. And of course you don't feel too good about that as you're standing on the roof, but there's not a whole lot you can do about it, and I figured "Well, if I'm going to float down the stream I'd rather float down standing on top of a garage roof than all by myself. It gives you some protection, I'd say. If that whole garage bangs into a pile of debris or, or something solid, maybe I can get off of it onto something solid, if some debris hits it, at least it's hitting the garage roof and not hitting me. But as luck would have it, it only moved, I suppose, twenty feet or so hit a ~~couple~~ of trees and stopped. And I later discovered that underneath that garage roof was a cabin cruiser that somebody had stored in the garage and that helped the garage roof up. I don't mean to imply that the cabin cruiser was floating, I'm sure it was standing on the bottom in the mud with the garage, weight of the garage roof on top of it, but it held it up..

JW But it did, you say, it did, the garage roof did go down slightly?

TO It went, yeah, it, the elevation dropped quite a bit, but still well above the water, and the thing came to rest against this clump of trees.

JW The roof or the garage, the garage..

TO This is the roof, really, later, course I didn't, I didn't really know what I had under me at the time, standing there in the roof in the dark in the rain, everything else. But later the next day I could see there, there's just no wall left to that garage at all, all that brick wall was just carried away and gone.

JW So the boat was supporting you and the boat was lodged against the tree and you were,,

TO Put it this way, the boat was holding everything up. The garage roof was on top of the boat keeping the boat from being completely washed away and smashed; the boat was holding the garage roof up. Garage roof was jammed against a whole clump of trees which kept it from moving any farther, and in turn, the garage roof sitting on the boat I think is what kept it from being washed farther (than it was). And then, I wasn't so conscious of this at the time, but I could see it the next day, a whole big pile of debris

TO piled up just upstream from this garage roof. I guess the fact it was sitting there invited oh, just an unbelievable pile of debris, probably debris from several different houses just fall piled in tight there. Well, once that debris piled up got well established, I suppose it formed quite a bit of a breakwater.

JW And how long did you stay up on that roof?

TO I would estimate probably a couple of hours I stayed on the roof.

JW Till the waters began to recede?

TO Till the water, yeah, I, I didn't make records of times and all so I can't be as definite on this as I'd like to be, I think, oh, maybe one o'clock or so the height of the water peaked out and, or maybe even earlier, and my ~~guz~~ best guess would be it was about maybe two o'clock in the morning that the water was down enough that I figured I could safely get off the garage roof. It, it wasn't real comfortable up there, I was shivering about as hard as I've ever shivered in my life, shaking wet, of course, and I suppose part of that shivering was emotional, you stand there and not do anything. So, when the water got down enough and the, more than even the, more than the height of the water, really, the strength of the current is the thing that, that I worried about at that time, <sup>when</sup> both the water and the force of the current seemed to be down enough that it, that it looked safe to get off, relatively safe, I took the lowest corner of the roof and ~~jumped~~ jumped down off it and floundered through the water to a, to a house that was on Jackson Boulevard, this house would be, oh, right about here on the map, fact, you can see, it, you can see it to this day, it's a green house on Jackson. I floundered over to this house, there was a man in the house who had been shining a flashlight over in my direction, he'd shine it on me and then he'd shine it on, train it on a couple of trees and then he'd train it on something farther down, alternately, and as I was on this garage roof, I could hear, downstream from me some distance, I could hear a child crying out. He was, as I sort of guessed at the time and later confirmed, he was up in one of these trees that was on downstream from me, and very faintly in the distance I could hear a woman's voice reassuring him. sort of have to recognize, I didn't make out any words even, particularly the woman's reassuring



TO voice , I didn't even make out any words, but you could just tell from the tone and so on, that this was a voice reassuring the kid. And I later learned that that was my wife.

JW Really?

TO Yeah. That was my wife. She was in a tree farther down.

JW How had she gone from the trailer, from the truck , to a tree?

TO Well, there's a little story there.

JW story, I don't know.

TO There's a little story there, might as well go and pick up her story. Apparently halfway down Franklin Drive the truck and camper hit a tree. I'm not even sure which side of Franklin Drive it is, somewhere in here. It got out of the middle and hit a tree on the edge. At that point my wife got out of the truck and camper, incidentally, we had a camper with the sliding , big glass sliding door at the rear end of it. And she figured that rather than try to open a side door against the current, and I think this was pretty cool thinking on her part, she crawled back into the camper. Now we had, we had taken out the back window of the truck and the front window of the camper so we had a , a passageway through there and we filled it in with cloth material so that you could go from, you would crawl through from the cab of the truck into the camper. It was a little tight fit, but she said that particular night, it went pretty easy, there wasn't any problem getting back through that tight fit under the stress. She got back in the camper and then slid open this sliding glass door on the camper which was, I say, pretty cool thinking on her part , because you're not trying to open something against the pressure of the water, you're just ~~ksliding~~ sliding it. And apparently it was the back of the truck that had lodged against the tree, so she was right in shape to slip out of the back end of the camper and climb that tree. Well, she was in that tree for awhile; apparently while she was in that tree another car, smacked the truck knocked it loose from the tree, so camper and car washed down the, washed down the embankment. And of course that's when I saw the camper go by low in the water and was, was worried as hell. But, but she was out of it at that point, fortunately. Well, then



TO this tree that she was in, halfway down Franklin Drive got uprooted by the force of the current or by debris hitting it, or both, it got uprooted and washed down. And she hung onto the tree..

JW With the..child?

TO No, she was by herself here.

JW By herself.

TO By herself. She hung onto the tree, which was, I think, the smart thing to do,. Might as well hang onto something solid. Instead of be all by yourself. She hung onto that tree. Along with the tree, she got washed over the foundation of this knew house, the new brick house that I mentioned I saw carried off of its foundation. She got washed over that foundation and got some nice bruises on her hip in the process, but fortunately nothing broken. Then she got lodged, or her tree and all got close enough to a better tree that she was able to get off that one, climb this, this better tree. Okay, now, it's from this better tree, now, that I heard her reassuring the kid who later turned out to be a little boy,; he was ..

JW Same tree, or..

TO No, this, this (story) is sperate, he was in a nearby tree, it must have been somewhere in between, his tree must have been intermediate between my garage roof and my wife's tree. But I had no way of knowing that this was my wife's voice reassuring the little boy in the intermediate tree. If, if, either one of us had halled at the top of our voice, I don't know if the other one would have recognized it. Because there was such a noise from all that raging water and stuff being torn loose and what not.

JW So did you, did your wife get down from the tree as the waters began to recede, or how long was she up there?

TO I suspect that she was in the tree probably an hour or so ~~xxxxx~~ longer than I was on the garage roof, because I got down off the garage roof on my own , floundered through the water over ~~xxxxxx~~ to this house, and then from the house, I, I asked the owners "Is there anything deeper between here and Jackson Boulevard?" and he assured me there wasn't, so then I walked across the lawn to the house to Jackson Boulevard, say I walked across, probably water up to the knees or higher, but not too bad, walked out to Jackson

TO Boulevard, and of course my first thought at this point is "How do I find out about my wife?" Well, unbeknownst to me, she was still up in that tree. I might say, I'm her at the moment, she and was, she and the little boy were rescued by the National Guard, I suppose probably an hour or so after I got down off my tree they came in with boats and so on which is a good thing to have in a case like that, whoever (plonders) out into the water have a rope around his waist and somebody else back in the better place holding onto the other end of it and so on. They, they rescued her out of her tree and rescued the little boy and, and took them to , I forget whether it was a church or a school they took them too, a sort of an assembly point and from there some, a quite young couple there picked her up and took her to their house and gave her a bath and some dry clothes to put on and that sort of thing, and, and fortunately, that house still had a working telephone, so she called from there to a good friend of ours in, in my department at school, the electrical..(End of Reel #1)  
(Reel #2)

JW This is John Watterson, continuation , side 2 of the previous tape, June 29, 1972, I'm talking about, talking to Tom Oliver about his experiences in the flood. Okay.

TO Okay, let's see , and down off the garage roof and over to Jackson Boulevard, now, and my first thought was for my wife, I'd see that camper float by low in the water, so I waded down Jackson Boulevard as far as the 32nd Street Bridge across Jackson , I'm not sure what I thought I was going to accomplish, but was looking for any trace of the pickup camper or anybody that would have any word of my wife. I didn't see anything as far as that 32nd Street Bridge, so I turned around and started going back. About this time I met a man with a, with a pickup truck on Jackson Boulevard and he had a radio in the truck, and so I asked him, "How do I go about checking on my wife?" He , he said, well, he'd radio in to, whatever his headquarters was and they could try checking missing persons and so on and so forth. So we started , I guess we were both on foot and his truck was a hundred yards or so away, and we started walking back toward his truck., Along the way, incidentally, we saw a body in a pile of debris right alongside Jackson Boulevard, body of a young girl, I went up and felt



RO to see if there was any pulse there and there wasn't, so, so the, course now my friend with the radio truck had to report a body first before he could worry about tracking down missing persons.

JW Which was sort of unsettling, was it not?

TO Well, I don't know, at that point you're so unsettled anyhow, I'm not sure the, the

body, it's not a pretty sight, but I'm not sure it, whether it added that much to the way I felt already or not. But, ...then as we got back to his truck, some people

came up and, and desperately wanted a radio call put in to get a, a doctor by helicopter to some area that was otherwise completely inaccessible. Course the way it was raining

and the darkness of the night and all, no one could see a helicopter wasn't going to get in there for some time. And at any rate, by this time we have all these other

radio calls for his, had so many things for this poor man to do with his radio that, that really were more important than trying to track down my wife, because this was,

this was really just looking for information, it wasn't trying to, to save anybody's life. But I sort of got discouraged and walked on down Jackson Boulevard. I'm not

sure at this point that some of my actions made a whole lot of sense, particularly in the light of hindsight. At about this point here I am, wet to the skin, cold, shivering,

everything else, can't seem to do anything about locating my wife, I thought, well, okay. I'll walk, the water's quite a bit down from what it used to be, I'll just walk back to

where my house was, and it was a split level house and up on the top story I can pull a towel out of the cabinet and dry myself off and get in bed and just wait until it gets

light because I'm not going to accomplish anything out here probably until daylight. So started walking back toward my own, own house. Well, it wasn't too bad going back in

and along Riverdale Drive... oh, things tend to get black with debris and everything else, but still I could make my way along Riverdale Drive pretty well to about the, about the

corner of my cul-de-sac, and about that point I really got disoriented. Things weren't where they ought to be. And I really got confused. I got so confused I started asking

myself, "Well, what's wrong, where did I take the wrong turn, how did I get on the wrong street, it's just doesn't, doesn't seem to be any way of doing it wrong and still

I'm, somehow I'm not in the right place." And oh, about here things got worse, about



T0 this corner, mud was deep, the water was flowing faster than it had been up on the higher ground; I saw a house that just had the living room wall completely washed away, it was just completely laid open , so I got up and waked into that house. And mud all over the floor, you could see that the water level had been clear up to the top of the kitchen cabinets but now it was down maybe a foot below the level of the basic floor of the house, one-story house.

JW Thiw as at the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac?

TO This is the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac. And , okay, so I just walked into one of the bedrooms in this house and flopped down on the bed and slept rather fitfully for an hour or two until it, I suppose it was about 4:30 a.m. when it started noticeably getting light out, you could see what was happening. And so this made a big difference, up to that point I'd been floundering around in the dark and couldn't see anything, contributed to the general disorientation as it got light I got up, walked out. or got out of the thouse again, I'm still wading a little water and so on; look down to where my house ought to be and just nothing there. This is the first time that I realized that the house was just completely gone. The house, two houses adjoining it on one side were just completely wiped out, gone. On the other side, the next door nieghbor on the other side, his house was still there, but damaged completely beyond repair, but still in the place where it outght to be. To the left of that, oh, about see, about three, the three next houses after that, all of them had been-moved off their foundations and damaged beyond repair. They were kind of scrambled around so they weren't where they ought to be, one of them had apparently been swirled around and and was behind another one. Right next to it, adjoining it and up against it. So I began to understand why I was so disoriented the night before. Well, okay, now I, I waded back out to retrace my steps, waded back out to Jackson Boulevard, down Jackson Boulevard, went up , went up 32nd to West St. Anne, where I have some friends who live up there, I thought surely they'd be high and dry and I'd go up to, it's another man in our department, I thought "Well, I'll just go up to his house and use his telephone to make the necessary calls now and ifx find out about my wife." Get up to his house and discover

TO that even he had water clear up on his living room floor and basement just absolutely full of water and a mess. But I went in and, his daughter invited me in, I tried to use the telephone , it didn't seem to be working, and so I .. decided to press on farther, I went on up to another friend's house, on Sterling Street, which is up pretty high. Happens to be Professor Carl(Gruber ) from the electrical engineering department, went up to his front door and oh, they took me in, gave me some dry clothes, poured me a great big double shot of whiskey and left the bottle standing on the table, and believe me, a drink never tasted so good. I think I downed two double shots of straight whiskey on an empty stomach and i'm not the man that could usually do that and not be affected but about all it did was counteract the adrenalin a little bit at this time I think, and it sure felt good. We tried on their phone, which was working, although you'd have to pick up the receiver and wait a long time to get any dial tone and soon, the circuits were so busy, I guess, we tried calling missing persons and didn't really achieve any results. So Dr. Gruber and myself went back down and we walked along Jackson Boulevard, this key area, we ~~was~~ figured surely nothing would get past this, this 32nd street bridge, nothing would get past it alive at any rate, so we concentrated on the area between 32nd street bridge and, and Franklin Street up here and oh, we walked in along the edge of the creek here, all the way up. Couldn't see any sign of my pickup truck and , and no , no way of figuring out what had happened to my wife. We did spot the, the fiberglass top to my camper in a debris pile, and I could identify it for sure , that it ~~was~~ really was the top to my camper because I had a special fluorescent light on the top of the camper that I built myself, and there it was. Fact, the amazing thing is, this circular fluorescent light bulb was perfectly intact, not broken. Here's the whole camper, smashed, the whole thing, just smashed to bits, and that light bulb somehow survived. Well, we walked back up Jackson and back up West St. Anne and headed w back toward the Gruber's house and about this time, Professor Ron Schmitz was the man my wife had called, he drove by in his car and hailed us and told me that my wife was safe , and they'd heard from her, and that was about the greatest news I'd heard in a long time. Well, I, I guess that about completes whole thing.



BJW Let me ask you, were you aware at any time of the water which had been released from the

breaking of Canyon Lake Dam, in other words, was there kind of a, of an increase in incre-  
ment to the water, of rapid increment to the water at any given time?

TO Well, from the, from the time that I, from the time that I left the house, (pause

in tapping) Yeah, I'd have to say that from the time that we started trying to evacuate

the house the water had been rising rapidly, I certainly was conscious of that. I wasn't

aware of any sudden wall of water from the breaking of the dam; I'm sure that it must

have added something somewhere and done something to increase the damage, but I'm

quite convinced we would have had close to the same amount of damage even had the dam

been able to hold, which of course is completely impossible, an earth dam with water

flowing over the top of it all the way, no matter how well constructed it is, it's gonna

go. I, I think it was a well-constructed dam, I agree with authorities on that subject

you can look at the back side of it today and see that water flowed over the top and

eroded the back side of it for some time before it went. And I just don't see how you

can expect any more out of an earth-filled dam than that. Had the whole dam been

poured out of solid concrete, the water still would have gone over the top of it and we

still would have had a flood that would have been almost as devastating, I'm sure.

JW I wonder, perhaps, you were out on the roof of the garage at the time the dam broke,

because

TO I'm sure I must have been.

JW .. I've spoken with observed a, a sort of dramatic rise in the water which they

attributed to the of the dam.

TO I'm sure I must have been on the roof of the garage, and you can see from the story

that things did continue to get worse after I got up there, that was after I got up

there houses tore loose and even my garage tore loose, and that big impetus may well

have occurred when the dam broke.

JW While you were in the water and perhaps even on the roof, was your mind so occupied with

thoughts of your own survival that you didn't, that you didn't have time to think

about the danger you were in, or did it occur to you that you were kind of working

with, with death at this point?

TO Oh, it certainly occurred to me that I was in grave danger. But I don't know, I've been in grave danger before, I flew bombers during World War II and got shot down once and so I didn't, I didn't...

JW So this was not an unique experience for you in that

TO No. Fortunately, we don't go through that experience very many times in life, and, and I don't want to belittle it. I felt, myself, I felt quite aware that I was in grave danger, but I, I think I proceeded really, quite logically to try to do everything I could to minimize the danger.

JW Yes, you certainly did.

TO I was extremely concerned about my wife, yet at no point did I see any conceivable way where I could do some great heroic act and do anything to alter her situation, you know, and you see, when you're standing on the garage roof and you see the camper float by low in the water and I think it would have been nothing but the height of folly to try to jump off and swim over to it or anything of that sort.

JW Have you had any kind of, of nightmares or, or any kind of mental aberrations of any kind since, since this experience. I mean, had it affected, do you feel like you've recovered now, has it affected you at all in your reactions to things in general.

WTO No, I don't think ..

JW You recovered pretty quickly after the whiskey, and..

TO I think I recovered pretty quickly..

JW ..finding your wife, and so on.

TO I have, fortunately, I think, been able to keep my mind busy with, with all the innumerable things that have to be done about getting a new place to live and salvaging what you can..

JW Where was your house, incidentally? Did you ever locate where your house had been moved to ?

TO , it was completely demolished, and you'd find a little bit of siding in one debris pile and a little bit of roofing in another debris pile in, in the house, you just wouldn't find

JW Personal possessions all completely destroyed.



TO Oh, almost. We , we picked up a few bits and pieces here and there. We were able to dig out of the mud down in the basement two Japanese (similar) vases unharmed.

JW This is what you needed.

TO Well, I was very happy to recover those, because they meant something, they had been property of my wife's mother and been in the family and they have a lot of meaning, that's the kind of thing you can't replace with ~~money~~ money if, if the ~~w~~flood washed away a suit of clothes of mine, why, I'm not attached to it, I can go out and buy a new one if I have to, but it's those, the thing I think that, that really hurts and there's no point thinking about it cause there's nothing you can do about it, but , but you kind of hate the things that you just can't go out and replace for money that, personal items and , well, the momentos and photograph albums, things you were really attached to that you just can't run out and replace.

JWq Have you had any kind of feelings about how, the way in which the flood was handled, the preparation or lack of preparation for the flood, the ~~w~~arning or lack of warning at the time of the flood, the , perhaps, lack of flood control, the failure of the flood control in your area , are you..do you have any thoughts on that?

TO I ~~do~~ have no great thoughts on the subject, I wouldn't care to cast any criticism, I don't think anybody visualized really seriously the possibility of such a severe flood. When the water was rising I talked to my neighbor two, two or three doors down, and he said, "Oh, well, it got up about this high in 1962 and then it went back down ~~and~~ again, so probably nothing to worry about." I, no, I don't~~think~~ see any point in trying to cast any blame or criticism for, for what went on in the past as far as ~~w~~arning or flood control, either one is concerned. It certainly was a extremely unique situation as far as the rainfall was concerned, I'm sure you know that at some stage of the game, I'm not sure exactly when, they say they closed the gates at Pactola and let no more water out of it, . So all this ~~the~~ <sup>flood</sup> ~~water~~ came from water down the stream from Pactola Reservoir. Pactola, of course, held. I might say for the future, I think obviously we should learn and set up some kind of flood warning system, and I certainly am in no position to sit here and say what the answers are, but there should be some sort of a flood warning system, the possibility of some sort of a flood control system should be,

TO should be considered and weighed against the idea of just wiping out all property on the flood plain of the creek. Cause at some stage of the game it may be more economical to build a , a flood control dam or dike or sea wall or whatever it takes as compared to trying to just wipe out all that property that 's in the flood plain which is, would be a tremendously costly project.

JW Some people have advocated

TO I guess all these things have been taken into consideration and considered.

(End of Interview)





SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of informant Tom Oliver

Address 3860 Riverdell, Rapid City, South Dakota

Date of interview June 29, 1972

Name of Researcher J. Watterson

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

Location of Interview Social Science and Languages Building, School of Mines, Rapid City

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

Subject headings under which you feel this interview should be listed:

*Rate of rise of the water; Swept down Franklin Ave by water, Took refuge <sup>roof of</sup> ~~Spent the night on~~ a garage, wife's experiences; Search for his wife; Comments on hotel workings*

Date of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Age 49

Sex Male

County Pennington

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

Occupation Professor, Electrical Engineering, S.D. School of Mines

Education \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

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



- Q. June 29, 1972, this is John Watterson, I'm talking with Mr. Tom Oliver who lived, what was the address?
- A. 3860 Riverdale Drive.
- Q. 360?
- A. 38.
- Q. 3860 Riverdale Drive, which is in the northeast quarter of the southwest quarter of section 9, township 1 north, range 7 east. You can just, why don't you just \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Very good. We were aware, throughout the evening, of course, of heavy rains and the fact that the creek was rather high. I think we got misled, because up to a certain point, although the creek was high, the rate of rise was extremely slow, maybe it would rise a foot in an hour and so naturally my wife and I figured well, if the time ever comes, there's no problem getting out, you know. And so I guess all the early part of the evening, whatever concern we had was for. . . was for taking precautions so as to minimize the damage based on the rising water. In other words, we visualized the possibility of maybe a little water in the basement, and that was about all.
- Q. You were watching the water from, from your house?
- A. We, we went out and looked at the, at the creek every so often, we couldn't help but be aware of the fact that it was rather high, tremendous amount of the water going over the spillway and quite a raging torrent going down the spillway in the normal course of the, of the creek. But still, this was, this was in the creek bed and not enough to do any damage.
- Q. About how far were you actually, your house located from the creek itself?
- A. From the main creek there was only one other house between my house and the,

and the main creek. Actually, my house had a branch of the creek that formed part of the border of our back yard. You, you can see that branch on the map, here, of course. Part of the border between us and Canyon Lake Park was this, this off shoot of the creek. It was part of the whole set-up of Canyon Lake Park, I guess they let water out and had it going in several streams through the park, made the park very attractive, and then one of these lesser streams formed the boundary between my backyard and the park. It might have, at least, before the flood, it made that one of the extremely desirable lots in Rapid City, as you could look out the backyard and see the ducks on the duck pond and see the kids playing in the park, and all that sort of thing. And it was really, at that time, nobody worrying about floods, that was really a premium location. Well, as I say, we were aware of the rising water throughout the evening, but it was rising slowly and we didn't, we didn't really think of personal danger. It got up to the point where it was beginning to seep into the basement and still (somehow) my main concern was to saw a couple of little boards and nail them across the vents leading into the crawlspace into our house which was going to minimize the rate at which the water could seep into the basement. And about the time I finished doing that, it must have been. . . I can't spot the time we got the warning over the radio to get out immediately, that it was gonna get much worse. So, my wife and I got in, oh, I might say that I went out to move my wife's little Dodge Dart out of the way because it was, it was in the driveway in such a position that it would block my truck, and I figured the truck was the better vehicle to get out in. I think the water was about up to my ankles as I moved that Dodge out of the driveway, and by the time I could get my wife in the truck and start moving it, the water was



up above my knees. It was rising that rapidly at this point in time. There was a . . . just a sudden increase in the rate of rise of the water there. We, so we started driving out in this pick-up with a camper on it and we got about halfway down Riverdale trying to get to Jackson Boulevard, the engine drowned out on account of the water. We got to this corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive, and at that point there must have been half a dozen cars in front of me all stalled out on account of the water on 38th Street blocking any further progress toward Jackson Boulevard, at least in the vehicle. Now, my department head and good friend, Professor Bill Hickson was in a car right in front of us. I could see his Buick right in front of where I stood at the corner of Riverdale Drive, 38th and Franklin Drive and he had just picked up off of Riverdale Drive his mother, and the man she was married to, Mr. Paul Thompson. Bill's father had died and so his mother was remarried. And I knew these two old folks were in his car. And I saw him out in the water trying to do something, push the, push the Buick or I'm not sure what. So my first thought, I still, I still didn't recognize personal danger to myself or my wife. I figured, well, the thing to do is get out there and help him. So, I opened the door of the truck and jumped out into the water; about the time I hit that water I knew I wasn't going to help anybody 'cause I got washed across 38th Street, just forced by the current, washed across 38th Street and managed to grab a telephone pole on the corner and hung on to that, both arms around it, hugging it for dear life. My pick-up truck with the camper on it and my wife called out to me, "What should I do, should I get out?" And I don't know, where I stood at the time it looked, the cab of the truck looked like a better place than where I was, so I told her, "No, stay in there."

So in a minute or so the whole truck with my wife in it got washed down Franklin Drive. It wasn't very long before I had the decision \_\_\_\_\_ hanging on to that telephone pole any higher, the water was rising, it was, it was splashing into my face from the pile up in front of the pole. The current was so strong, I guess the basic water depth was up to my chest somewhere. But it wasn't getting any better, I couldn't see any way of climbing the pole, so I figured, well, I, I just got to do something else. So I let go of the pole and got washed straight down Franklin Drive, the current seemed to be going straight down Franklin, as I recall I went right down the middle which I didn't really like at the time, I'd liked to have been off to the side somewhere where I could grab something, but where I got washed there was nothing to grab. A case like this, people that haven't been through it kind of think about swimming, and Gee, you're just not swimming, you're trying to keep your head above water and that's about all. . . .

Q. Can you guide yourself at all?

A. Maybe to a slight extent. But not very much, that current takes you where it wants to, or you might get a, by great effort you might get a few feet to one side or the other side compared to where it's taking you, but really, there's so little control, it's, I think it's hard to imagine unless you've been in it.

Q. Were you being struck by debris?

A. No, fortunately, I wasn't, and was lucky there. This is, I'm sure this is what a number of people killed in the flood, I'm sure this is what did it, because in a case like that if you got hit by something and knocked out, that would just be the end.



Q. Would you say that this was before or after the dam broke?

A. I think this is probably before the dam broke, but probably water was pouring over the top of it by this time, point in time. I've subsequently talked to Leonard Swanson and looked at, oh, the most authoritative guesses available as to when the dam actually broke, and this would be my best estimate, that I think water was pouring over the top of it, but I don't think it had broken yet. It's hard for me to pinpoint time, see, even though I had my watch on and every so often I looked at it, I just, I didn't think to, well, I couldn't have made any written records if I'd tried to, as wet as everything was. And I didn't. . . somehow at a point in time like that your main concern isn't remembering times, you know, your main concern is figuring out how to stay alive. And so I didn't make accurate mental notes that I'd remember as to exactly what happened when. Well, I was, as I say, washed down Franklin Drive to about this corner in Franklin Drive, and at that point, very fortunately, the current sort of took me square on into a wide garage, it was built of bricks. I remember, seem to remember it had three doors facing me, in other words, I was taken right toward the middle of the three door garage. Well then, right in front of the garage, of course, the, the current had to split and the water was a little bit less strong, a little bit of slack water there so to speak, \_\_\_\_\_ the current was trying to wash me around the, the right hand edge of the garage. And had it done so, I'd have been right in the main course of Rapid Creek which as you can see here on the map, the Rapid Creek, here, goes right by this corner of Franklin Drive \_\_\_\_\_ right, the map doesn't even show room for it, but right about here is where that garage is. So I got carried right in front of the garage \_\_\_\_\_. I managed to

grab a garage door handle, my right hand and for a few seconds it seemed like it was all I could do just to hang on to that garage door handle \_\_\_\_\_ force of the, the current was so great. Somehow I managed to get myself back up on my feet. And that makes a tremendous difference, if you're down in that fast moving water you, you're just virtually helpless, but once you get back up on your feet, it made it a totally different story. Then if I was able to keep my foot in, and lean into it and all that sort of thing, had some degree of control again, I suppose the water here was up well over my knees, close to my thighs.

Q.

Now you were hanging onto the garage as you pulled yourself up.

A.

Yeah. After I got myself up I didn't necessarily have to hold the garage

anymore in order to stay put \_\_\_\_\_ . Okay, my next thought was to get up on

that garage roof, I didn't have too much choice as to what to do, you know.

You can't, seems like you can't get very far and the garage was sort of a

haven of safety because the water was a little slack right in front of it,

although it was still moving. So my thought was to get up on top of the

garage. Well, I groped around and somehow stumbled across a, seemed like a

block of concrete, maybe two and a half feet on the side, and still don't

know to this day what it was, 'cause it was down under, completely under the

muddy water, and all I could do was feel it, I couldn't see it. I have a feel-

ing it was heavy enough that I couldn't possibly have moved it if it hadn't

been under water. And fortunately it was heavy enough the water didn't wash

it away. It seemed to have a big hollow hole in it, I'm thinking it may have

been some kind of planter. I could, since this was under water, I could manipu-

late it by tumbling it side over side, and I put this block of concrete just



where I wanted it. And stood up on top of it, which meant I was up to about my ankles in water, stood up on top of it and tried to swing myself up on the roof. Well, I got my hands gripping the, the edge of the roof, there's a big overhang to this roof, now, got my hands on it, swung one leg up and over and then I couldn't get any farther. Since it was a big overhang, there's nothing to push against and everything's all wet, and it seemed like there was just no way. So I got back down on my block of concrete and looked around and thought a bit, just across the. . .not really across the street, maybe twenty feet away, there was a brick house under construction, a couple of long pieces of two by six projected out from that house. It may have been some sort of a ramp going into the door of the house. So, I decided I'd better risk it and managed to work my way across the current to the end of one of those two by sixes, it was nailed on to something including the house, but by wrenching it around, I managed to break it loose, I'm sure the current was helping me do that, too. Broke this two by six loose, carried it back across to my garage location, tumbled my block to the right place so I could put one end of the two by six on top of the block, the other end of the two by six on top of the roof and crawled up the two by six to get on the garage roof. So, really, from there on I had a grandstand seat. I watched trailers float down, houses float down, cars float down, kind of surprised me how nicely a car floats. . . .

Q. Did you see people who were being washed down or \_\_\_\_\_ trailers. . . ?

A. I didn't actually see any people, now, you have to remember this is night, dark, noisy. . . .

Q. Hear people screaming?

A. I'm not really aware at this time of any screams. I saw my truck float by with

my camper on it, low in the water and naturally pretty worried about my wife. Well, about three houses, three or four houses in my immediate vicinity got torn loose from their foundations, quite a, quite a sound, never heard anything like it. Creaking, grinding, groaning of timbers, finally the house snaps loose, noise quits and floats away free. A few days ago I was at a meeting, informal meeting, gathering, one of the local architects was saying, "Well, if, if all these houses had just had the proper bolts to bolt them to the foundation, the damage would have been a great deal less." I was forced to take exception with him, I'm an engineer myself, those houses I heard tear loose, a few bolts wouldn't have made any difference.

Q. I've heard that too, from a number of people who said that the older houses were, were bolted and the newer ones that even where they had bolts they hadn't actually had the \_\_\_\_\_.

A. I can agree that it might make a difference in a very marginal case, but those houses I saw go, bolts wouldn't have made any difference. I think people get that enamored with the strength of bolts, having seen what that water can do, it. . .well, for example, as I stood there, the brick house across from me which was under construction, the brick walls were all up, it was as strong as it was ever gonna be. I think they, they hadn't yet framed the windows and a few things like that. As I stood there the brick house got quickly washed off its foundations. You look at it today, there's nothing left but a poured concrete foundation, every brick is gone. I was standing on the roof of a brick garage, finally this brick garage gave way and started off its foundation. And, of course, you don't feel too good about that as you're standing on the roof, but there's not a whole lot you can do about it, and I figured, "Well,



if I'm going to float down the stream I'd rather float down standing on top of a garage roof than all by myself." It gives you some protection, I'd say. If that whole garage bangs into a pile of debris or, or something solid, maybe I can get off of it onto something solid, if some debris hits it, at least it's hitting the garage roof and not hitting me. But as luck would have it, it only moved, I suppose, twenty feet or so, hit a clump of trees, and stopped. And I later discovered that underneath that garage roof was a cabin cruiser that somebody had stored in the garage and that held the garage roof up. I don't mean to imply that the cabin cruiser was floating, I'm sure it was standing on the bottom in the mud with the garage, weight of the garage roof on top of it, but it held it up. . .

Q. But it did, you say, it did, the garage roof did go down slightly?

A. It went, yeah, it, the elevation dropped quite a bit, but still well above the water, and the thing came to rest against this clump of trees.

Q. The roof or the garage, the garage. . . ?

A. This is the roof, really, later, 'course I didn't, I didn't really know what I had under me at the time, standing there in the roof in the dark in the rain, everything else. But later the next day I could see there, there's just no wall left to that garage at all, all that brick wall was just carried away and gone.

Q. So the boat was supporting you and the boat was lodged against the tree and you were. . . .

A. Put it this way, the boat was holding everything up. The garage roof was on top of the boat keeping the boat from being completely washed away and smashed; the boat was holding the garage roof up. Garage roof was jammed against a whole

clump of trees which kept it from moving any farther, and in turn, the garage roof sitting on the boat I think is what kept it from being washed farther (than it was). And then, I wasn't so conscious of this at the time, but I could see it the next day, a whole big pile of debris piled up just upstream from this garage roof. I guess the fact it was sitting there invited, oh, just an unbelievable pile of debris from several different houses just all piled in tight there. Well, once that debris pile got well established, I suppose it formed quite a bit of a breakwater.

Q. And how long did you stay up on that roof?

A. I would estimate probably a couple of hours I stayed on the roof.

Q. Till the waters began to recede?

A. Till the water, yeah, I, I didn't make records of times and all so I can't be as definite on this as I'd like to be. I think, oh, maybe one o'clock or so the height of the water peaked out and, or maybe even earlier, and my best guess would be it was about maybe two o'clock in the morning that the water was down enough that I figured I could safely get off the garage roof. It, it wasn't real comfortable up there, I was shivering about as hard as I've ever shivered in my life, shaking wet, of course, and I suppose part of that shivering was emotional, you stand there and not do anything. So, when the water got down enough and the, more than even the, more than the height of the water, really, the strength of the current is the thing that, that I worried about at that time, when both the water and the force of the current seemed to be down enough that it, that it looked safe to get off, relatively safe, I took the lowest corner of the roof and jumped down off it. And, floundered through the water to a, to a house that was on Jackson Boulevard.



This house would be, oh, right about here on the map, fact, you can see it, you can see it to this day, it's a green house on Jackson. I floundered over to this house, there was a man in the house who had been shining a flashlight over in my direction, he'd shine it on me and then he'd shine it on, train it on a couple of trees and then he'd train it on something farther down, alternately, and as I was on this garage roof, I could hear, downstream from me some distance, I could hear a child crying out. He was, as I sort of guesses at the time and later confirmed, he was up in one of these trees that was on downstream from me, and very faintly in the distance I could hear a woman's voice reassuring him. Sort of have to recognize, I didn't make out any words even, particularly the woman's reassuring voice, I didn't even make out any words, but you could just tell from the tone and so on, that this was a voice reassuring the kid. And I later learned that that was my wife.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. That was my wife. She was in a tree farther down.

Q. How had she gone from the trailer, from the truck, to a tree?

A. Well, there's a little story there.

Q. \_\_\_\_\_ story, I don't know.

A. There's a little story there, might as well go and pick up her story. Apparently halfway down Franklin Drive the truck and camper hit a tree. I'm not even sure which side of Franklin Drive it is, somewhere in here. It got out of the middle and hit a tree on the edge. At that point my wife got out of the truck and camper, incidentally, we had a camper with the sliding, big glass sliding door at the rear end of it. And she figured that rather than try to open a side door against the current, and I think this was pretty cool thinking on

her part, she crawled back into the camper. Now we had, we had taken out the back window of the truck and the front window of the camper so we had a, a passageway through there and we filled it in with cloth material so that you could go from, you could crawl through from the cab of the truck into the camper. It was a little tight fit, but she said that particular night, it went pretty easy, there wasn't any problem getting back through that tight fit under the stress. She got back in the camper and then slid open this sliding glass door on the camper which was, I say, pretty cool thinking on here part, because you're not trying to open something against the pressure of the water, you're just sliding it. And apparently it was the back of the truck that had lodged against the tree, so she was right in shape to slip out of the back end of the camper and climb that tree. Well, she was in that tree for awhile; apparently while she was in that tree another car, smacked the truck, knocked it loose from the tree, so camper and car washed down the, washed down the embankment. And, of course, that's when I saw the camper go by low in the water and was, was worried as hell. But, but she was out of it at that point, fortunately. Well, then this tree that she was in, halfway down Franklin Drive got uprooted by the force of the current or by debris hitting it, or both, it got uprooted and washed down. And she hung onto the tree. . . .

Q. With the child?

A. No, she was by herself here.

Q. By herself.

A. By herself. She hung onto the tree, which was, I think, the smart thing to do. Might as well hang onto something solid, instead of be all by yourself, she hung onto that tree. Along with the tree, she got washed over the foundation



of this new house, the new brick house that I mentioned I saw carried off of its foundation. She got washed over that foundation and got some nice bruises on her hip in the process, but fortunately nothing broken. Then she got lodged on her tree and all got close enough to a better tree that she was able to get off that one, climb this, this better tree. Okay, now, it's from this better tree, now, that I heard her reassuring the kid who later turned out to be a little boy, he was. . . .

Q. Same tree, or. . . ?

A. No, this, his story is separate, he was in a nearby tree, it must have been somewhere in between, his tree must have been intermediate between my garage roof and my wife's tree. But I had no way of knowing that this was my wife's voice reassuring the little boy in the intermediate tree. If, if either one of us had hollered at the top of our voice, I don't know if the other one would have recognized it. Because there was such a noise from all that raging water and stuff being torn loose and what not.

Q. So did your, did your wife get down from the tree as the waters began to recede, or how long was she up there?

A. I suspect that she was in the tree probably an hour or so longer than I was on the garage roof, because I got down off the garage roof on my own, floundered through the water over to this house, and then from the house, I, I asked the owners, "Is there anything deeper between here and Jackson Boulevard?" And he assured me there wasn't, so then I walked across the lawn to the house to Jackson Boulevard, say I walked across, probably water up to the knees or higher, but no too bad, walked out to Jackson Boulevard, and, of course, my first thought at this point is, "How do I find out about my wife?" Well,

unbeknownst to me, she was still up in that tree. I might say, I'm

here at the moment, she was, she and the little boy were rescued by the National Guard. I suppose probably an hour or so after I got down off my tree they came in with boats and so on which is a good thing to have in a case like

that, whoever (flounders) out into the water, have a rope around his waist and somebody else back in the better place holding onto the other end of it and

so on. They, they rescued her out of her tree and rescued the little boy and, and took them to, I forget whether it was a church or a school they took them

to, a sort of an assembly point and from there some, a quite young couple there picked her up and took her to their house and gave her a bath and some dry

clothes to put on and that sort of thing, and, and fortunately, that house still had a working telephone, so she called from there to a good friend of

ours in, in my department at school, the electrical. . . (end of Reel #1)

Q. This is John Waterson, continuation, side 2 of the previous tape, June 29, 1972. I'm talking about, talking to Tom Oliver about his experiences in the

A. Okay, let's see--and down off the garage roof and over to Jackson Boulevard, now, and my first thought was for my wife, I'd seen that camper float by low

in the water, so I waded down Jackson Boulevard as far as the 32nd Street Bridge across Jackson, I'm not sure what I thought I was going to accomplish,

but was looking for any trace of the pickup camper or anybody that would have any word of my wife. I didn't see a thing as far as that 32nd Street Bridge,

so I turned around and started going back. About this time I met a man with a, with a pickup truck on Jackson Boulevard and he had a radio in the truck, and

so I asked him, "How do I go about checking on my wife?" He, he said, "Well,



he'd radio into, whatever his headquarters was and they could try checking missing persons and so on and so forth." So we started, I guess we were both on foot and his truck was a hundred yards or so away, and we started walking back toward his truck. Along the way, incidentally, we saw a body in a pile of debris right alongside Jackson Boulevard, a body of a young girl, I went up and felt to see if there was any pulse there and there wasn't, so, so the, 'course now my friend with the radio truck had to report a body first before he could worry about tracking down missing persons. . . .

Q. Which was sort of unsettling, was it not?

A. Well, I don't know, at that point you're so unsettled anyhow, I'm not sure the, the body, it's not a pretty sight, but I'm not sure it, whether it added that much to the way I felt already or not. But. . . then as we got back to his truck, some people came up and, and desperately wanted a radio call put in to get a, a doctor by helicopter to some area that was otherwise completely inaccessible. 'Course the way it was raining and the darkness of the night and all, one could see a helicopter wasn't going to get in there for some time. At any rate, by this time we have all these other radio calls for his, had so many things for this poor man to do with his radio that, that really were more important than trying to track down my wife, because this was, this was really just looking for information, it wasn't trying to, to save anybody's life. But I sort of got discouraged and walked on down Jackson Boulevard. I'm not sure at this point that some of my actions made a whole lot of sense, particularly in the light of hindsight. At about this point here I am wet to the skin, cold, shivering, and everything else, can't seem to do anything about locating my wife, I thought, "Well, okay. I'll walk, the water's quite

a bit down from what it used to be, I'll just walk back to where my house was, and it was a spit level house and up on the top story I can pull a towel out of the cabinet and dry myself off and get in bed and just wait until it gets light because I'm not going to accomplish anything out here probably until daylight." So started walking back toward my own, own house. Well, it wasn't too bad going back in and along Riverdale Drive, oh, thing tend to get black with debris and everything else, but still I could make my way along Riverdale Drive pretty well to about the, about the corner or my cul-de-sac, and about that point I really got disoriented. Things weren't where they ought to be. And I really got confused. I got so confused I started asking myself, "Well, what's wrong, where did I take the wrong turn, how did I get on the wrong street, it's just doesn't, doesn't seem to be any way of doing it wrong and still. . .I'm somehow, I'm not in the right place." And oh, about here things got worse, about this corner, mud was deep, the water was flowing faster than it had been up on the higher ground. I saw a house that just had the living room wall completely washed away, it was just completely laid open, so I got up and walked into that house. And mud all over the floor, you could see that the water level had been clear up to the top of the kitchen cabinets but now it was down maybe a foot below the level of the basic floor of the house, one-story house.

- Q. This was at the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac?
- A. This is the corner of Riverdale and the cul-de-sac. And, okay, so I just walked into one of the bedrooms in this house and flopped down on the bed and slept rather fitfully for an hour or two until it, I suppose it was about 4:30 a.m. when it started noticeably getting light out, you could see what was



And so this made a big difference, up to that point I'd been floundering around in the dark and couldn't see anything, contributed to the general disorientation. As it got tight I got up, walked out, or got out of the house again, I'm still wading a little water and so on; look down to where my house ought to be and just nothing there. This is the first time that I realized that the house was just completely gone. The house, two houses adjoining it on one side were just completely wiped out, gone. On the other side, the next door neighbor on the other side, his house was still there, but damaged completely beyond repair, but still in the place where it ought to be. To the left of that, oh, about see, about three, the three next houses after that, all of them had been moved off their foundations and damaged beyond repair. They were kind of scrambled around so they weren't where they ought to be, one of them had apparently been swirled around and, and was behind another one. Right next to it, adjoining it and up against it. So I began to understand why I was so disoriented the night before. Well, okay, now I, I waded back out to retrace my steps, waded back out to Jackson Boulevard, down Jackson Boulevard, went up, went up 32nd to West St. Anne, where I have some friends who live up there, I thought surely they'd be high and dry and I'd go up to, it's another man in our department, I thought, "Well, I'll just go up to his house and use his telephone to make the necessary calls now and find out about my wife." Get up to his house and discover that even he had water clear up on his living room floor and basement just absolutely full of water and a mess. But I went in and, his daughter invited me in, I tried to use the telephone, it didn't seem to be working, and so I decided to press on farther, I went on up to another friend's house, on Sterling Street, which is up pretty

high. Happens to be Professor Carl Gruber, from the Electrical Engineering department, went up to his front door and oh, \_\_\_\_\_ they took me in, gave me some dry clothes, poured me a great big double shot of whiskey, and left the bottle standing on the table, and believe me, a drink never tasted so good. I think I downed two double shots of straight whiskey on an empty stomach, and I'm not the man that could usually do that and not be affected but about all it did was counteract the adrenalin a little bit at this time, I think. And it sure felt good. We tried on their phone, which was working, although you'd have to pick up the receiver and wait a long time to get any dial tone and so on, the circuits were so busy, I guess. We tried calling missing persons and didn't really achieve any results. So Dr. Gruber and myself went back down and we walked along Jackson Boulevard, this key area, we figured surely nothing would get past this, this 32nd Street bridge, nothing would get past it alive at any rate, so we concentrated on the area between 32nd Street bridge and, and Franklin Street up here and, oh, we walked in along the edge of the creek here, all the way up. Couldn't see any sign of my pickup truck and, and no, no way of figuring out what had happened to my wife. We did spot the, the fiberglass top to my camper in a debris pile, and I could identify it for sure, that it really was the top to my camper because I had a special fluorescent light on the top of the camper that I built myself, and there it was. Fact, the amazing thing is, this circular fluorescent light bulb was perfectly intact, not broke. Here's the whole camper, smashed, the whole thing, just smashed to bits, and that light bulb somehow survived. Well, we walked back up Jackson and back up West St. Anne, and headed back toward the Gruber's house and about this time, Professor Ron Schmitz was the man my wife had called, he drove by



in his car and hailed us and told me that my wife was safe, and they'd heard from her, and that was about the greatest news I'd heard in a long time.

Well, I, I guess that about completes \_\_\_\_\_ whole thing.

Q. Let me ask you, were you aware at any time of the water which had been released from the breaking of Canyon Lake Dam? In other words, was there kind of a, of an increase in increment to the water, of rapid increment to the water at any given time?

A. Well, from the, from the time that I, from the time that I left the house. . . . (Pause in taping.) Yeah, I'd have to say that from the time that we started trying to evacuate the house the water had been rising rapidly, I certainly was conscious of that. I wasn't aware of any sudden wall of water from the breaking of the dam. I'm sure that it must have added something somewhere and done something to increase the damage, but I'm quite convinced we would have had close to the same amount of damage even had the dam been able to hold, which, of course, is completely impossible, an earth dam with water flowing over the top of it all the way, no matter how well constructed it is, it's gonna go. I, I think it was a well-constructed dam, I agree with authorities on that subject. You can look at the back side of it today and see that water flowed over the top and eroded the back side of it for some time before it went. And I just don't see how you can expect any more out of an earth-filled dam than that. Had the whole dam been poured out of solid concrete, the water still would have gone over the top of it and we still would have had a flood that would have been almost as devastating, I'm sure.

Q. I wonder, perhaps, you were out on the roof of the garage at the time the dam broke, because \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

- A. I'm sure I must have been.
- Q. I've spoken with. . .observed a, a sort of dramatic rise in the water which they attributed to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the dam.
- A. I'm sure I must have been on the roof of the garage, and you can see from the story that things did continue to get worse after I got up there, that was after I got up there houses tore loose and even my garage tore loose, and that big impetus may well have occurred when the dam broke.
- Q. While you were in the water and perhaps even on the roof, was your mind so occupied with thoughts of your own survival that you didn't, that you didn't have time to think about the danger you were in, or did it occur to you that you were kind of working with, with death at this point?
- A. Oh, it certainly occurred to me that I was in grave danger. But I don't know, I've been in grave danger before, I flew bombers during World War II and got shot down once and so I didn't, I didn't. . . .
- Q. So this was not a unique experience for you in that. . . .
- A. No. Fortunately, we don't go through that experience very many times in life, and, and I don't want to belittle it. I felt, myself, I felt quite aware that I was in grave danger, but I, I think I proceeded really, quite logically to try to do everything I could to minimize the danger.
- Q. Yes, you certainly did.
- A. I was extremely concerned about my wife, yet at no point did I see any conceivable way where I could do some great heroic act and do anything to alter her situation, you know, and you see, when your standing on the garage roof and you see the camper float by low in the water and I think it would have been nothing but the height of folly to try to jump off and swim over to it



or anything of that sort.

Q. Have you had any kind of, of nightmares or, or any kind of mental aberrations of any kind since, since this experience. I mean, had it affected, do you feel like you've recovered now, has it affected you at all in your reaction to things in general.

A. No, I don't think. . . .

Q. You recovered pretty quickly \_\_\_\_\_ after the whiskey, and. . . .

A. I think I recovered pretty quickly. . . .

Q. . . .finding your wife, and so on.

A. I have, fortunately, I think, been able to keep my mind busy with, with all the innumerable things that have to be done about getting a new place to live and salvaging what you can.

Q. Where was your house, incidentally? Did you ever locate where your house had been moved to \_\_\_\_\_?

A. \_\_\_\_\_, it was completely demolished, and you'd find a little bit of siding in one debris pile and a little bit of roofing in another debris pile in, in the house, you just wouldn't find \_\_\_\_\_.

Q. Personal possessions all completely destroyed.

A. Oh, almost. We, we picked up a few bits and pieces here and there. We were able to dig out of the mud down in the basement two Japanese (similar) vases unharmed.

Q. This is what you needed.

A. Well, I was very happy to recover those, because they meant something, they had been property of my wife's mother and been in the family and they have a lot of meaning. That's the kind of thing you can't replace with money if, if

the flood washed away a suit of clothes of mine, why, I'm not attached to it, I can go out and buy a new one if I have to, but it's those, the thing I think that, that really hurts and there's no point thinking about it 'cause there's nothing you can do about it but, but you kind of hate the things that you just can't go out and replace for money that, personal items, and, well, the momentos and photograph albums, things you were really attached to that you just can't run out and replace.

- Q. Have you had any kind of feelings about how, the way in which the flood was handled--the preparation or lack of preparation for the flood, the warning or lack of warning at the time of the flood, the, perhaps, lack of flood control, the failure of the flood control in your area, are you. . .do you have any thoughts on that?
- A. I have no great thoughts on the subject. I wouldn't care to cast any criticism. I don't think anybody visualized really seriously the possibility of such a severe flood. When the water was rising I talked to my neighbor, two, two or three doors down, and he said, "Oh, well, it got up about this high in 1962 and then it went back down again, so probably nothing to worry about." I, no, I don't see any point in trying to cast any blame or criticism for, for what went on in the past as far as warning or flood control, either one is concerned. It certainly was an extremely unique situation as far as the rainfall was concerned. I'm sure you know that at some stage of the game, I'm not sure exactly when, they say they closed the gates at Pactola and let no more water out of it. So all this flood came from water down the stream from Pactola Reservoir. Pactola, of course, held. I might say for the future, I think obviously we should learn and set up some kind of flood warning system,



and I certainly am in no position to sit here and say what the answers are, but there should be some sort of a flood warning system, the possibility of some sort of a flood control system should be, should be considered and weighed against the idea of just wiping out all property on the flood plain of the creek. 'Cause at some stage of the game it may be more economical to build a, a flood control dam or dike or sea wall or whatever it takes as compared to trying to just wipe out all that property that's in the flood plain which is, \_\_\_\_\_ would be tremendously costly project.

Q. Some people have advocated \_\_\_\_\_.

A. I guess all these things have been taken into consideration and considered.