Powerful Connections in Victim Voices

by Patricia J. Rettig

A flash flood raged through a constricted Colorado canyon one summer Saturday evening and effected the entire United States. Today, more than 40 years later, the voices of survivors and first responders evoke the terror of that dark night and the exhaustion of the recovery efforts.

> "The noise was the thing that was so impressive to me. Well, you can tell, of course, I know the river pretty well, and it's completely changed, and the big change is these huge rocks. And you could hear them at night, grinding down through there … with this roar that you just can't even believe. These giant rocks rolling by underneath the water. And, of course, towards the evening, why the trash settled down, and, oh, around two or three o'clock in the morning there weren't a lot of trees coming by; there was still an awful lot of water, but the noise was just really frightening." –Richard Huffsmith, Cedar Cove resident (http://hdl.handle.net/10217/76222)

More than eleven inches of rain falling in a matter of hours overwhelmed a modest mountain stream, changing—and taking—lives. On July 31, 1976, the state was on the eve of its centennial, and the country had been celebrating its bicentennial all summer. The Olympics boosted national pride and the celebratory mood.

In the Big Thompson Canyon, a steep, rocky stretch to the west of Loveland, a town 50 miles northwest of Denver, campers enjoyed a classic Colorado weekend and tourists drove to or from Estes Park, the town topping the canyon, and its main attraction, Rocky Mountain National Park. Canyon residents went about their lives, observing an early darkening due to low, heavy clouds, and the start of some rain. Residents in small communities like Glen Haven, Drake, and Cedar Cove would not be surprised by rainfall on a summer evening, but they took notice when it did not stop.

> "Yes, we could see the water as it came up higher and higher, and in fact, it looked like an ocean. And it built up to that volume so quickly, it was almost like one minute it was just rain, and then the next minute it was all this water, and then things started going down the river, like the first one was Ernie Conrad's green bus, brand-new, and some other cars, and some of them had their lights on and we didn't know whether the people were in them or not, and all sorts of things started coming down the river. And then I looked out, and there used to be a trailer house over there ... and it just sailed right across my yard, and went down, it took our well with it, and our propane tank, and it just disintegrated." –Dorothy Ferguson, Glen Haven resident (http://hdl.handle.net/10217/76215)

The rain showers that covered the upper canyon started around 6:30 in the evening and really got going in the next hour. Within two hours, the Loveland police received notification of dangerous road conditions in the canyon. By 9 p.m., multiple warnings of flash floods were issued, but with only one road through the canyon, evacuations faced limitations; the road followed the Big Thompson River's course. Neighbors began phoning each other to urge movement to higher ground, while police and emergency personnel did what little they could.

> "You could see the water and some of the debris splashing up on the highway. And we hadn't even completed our U-turn, and it sounded like a freight train coming. And it hit us. It's very hard to describe the terror one feels at that point, because I recall myself being in hysterics." –John McMaster, Loveland Ambulance Service (http://hdl.handle.net/10217/76229)

Panic and tragic scenes occurred along the length of the canyon, while at the mouth, people remained in disbelief about flash flood warnings since they had not witnessed any rain—until the wall of water arrived. During the darkest hours of the night, foundations were washed out from under buildings, and entire houses were washed away. Some cars were floated off of roads or driveways, while others were completely obliterated, discovered as mangled hunks of metal in the daylight. Though the worst of the rain ended overnight and the wall of debris-filled water spent its fury before reaching the plains below, rescue efforts took days, and recovery took years.

> "Really, at that point, there were, in the morgue, only two or three policemen, a couple of the coroners, and the rest of the people were essentially the Mental Health people. On observing the battered and unrecognizable condition of most of the remains, it became pretty darned apparent that identification was going to be a most important process in this" –James Dooney, Larimer County Mental Health Clinic director (http://hdl.handle.net/10217/76258)

Including the five people never found, the final death toll came to 144 men, women, and children. Only one third were local residents, the rest visiting from locations both within and beyond Colorado. No one had been prepared, as visitors never expected disaster to hit, and residents had not experienced such a flood for 25 years. Extending beyond local impact, the devastation touched Texas, Iowa, and Georgia, through both loss of human life and contributions to recovery. Through media coverage, the whole country paid attention.

The ongoing power of the fleeting storm and of the intense personal experience resides in the words of the survivors. The emotion emerges unmistakably in the recorded voices. Ordinary citizens who experienced an extraordinary, unexpected event shared their words, emotions, and stories at the invitation of an oral historian, David McComb (1980), a history professor at nearby Colorado State University. The voices, from very different perspectives, are among more than forty McComb captured in the aftermath of the Big Thompson flood, Colorado's worst natural disaster.

More than a standalone local history project, the voices McComb recorded add up to a vicarious experience for those not there. Reading or listening to these personal perspectives on a communal catastrophe today provides a method of time travel. No one desires a first-hand experience with a devastating flood or other natural disaster, yet it is a universally imminent risk. Mentally standing in someone else's waterlogged shoes, yard, or home shows us the impact of unpreparedness. The recordings humanize history, giving a voice to the past, taking listeners in the present to a particular event with timeless experiences.

Though floods are typically examined in terms of numerical data—rainfall, stream level rise, deaths, monetary losses—the human voice telling a narrative story best inspires true understanding and empathy. When oral historians such as McComb focus not on numerical or scientific data but rather on factual and contextual data through insightful eyewitness interviews, they can impart knowledge from various human perspectives across the entire event timeline. Better than the data collected and economic tally, superior even to after-

math photographs or instantaneous media coverage, human voices sharing stories convey what we would all want to avoid. We can learn from them, from the whole experience, how to better prepare and how to recover. The lessons connect each successive learning experience back to a time before.

For the future, scientists predict more frequent floods and other types of natural—and human-caused—disasters. These disasters expose society, laying life bare and showing the vulnerabilities of human-created systems and cultures in ways that everyday activity does not. After such events, some communities go back to normal, to status quo. Other communities change. When disasters cause change, they become historical events worthy of documentation and study. The Big Thompson flood had nationwide impact by improving disaster warnings and communications, recovery procedures, and local floodplain regulation (Gruntfest 1987). Voices of flood victims hold power. Survivors share experiences unknown and unimaginable outside the devastation. First responders reveal the challenges—logistical, physical, and emotional—they encounter. These human voices connect us across time and space not only to those people and their specific flood experiences, but also to the knowledge of what could happen to us and our communities. When combined with media coverage and scientific study, amateur photographs and home movies, victim voices complete the historical reflection and retelling of disastrous events.

References

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