[Tape 1 of 2]

An Oral History Tape Transcription

Of

Memories of Hurricane Alicia

Interviewer: Martha Mayo

Interviewees: Marcine Lanham and Jean Shepherd

1983
MM: ... talking with Marcine Lanham, Red Cross Volunteer. Ok, just start talking.

ML: Is it on?

MM: Ya.

ML: Oh. Sunday afternoon following Hurricane Alicia, the Red Cross sent a project manager or disaster chairman, Wesley McKenzie. He came and set up offices in the teen part of the Baytown Community Center. The rest of the disaster people came from the Houston headquarters. Some were sent to Pasadena, some to Galveston, some to, uh, Texas City and some to Baytown. They came from all over the United States. One wonderful couple came from Minnesota. One came, the one in charge of records came from West Virginia. They were all people of the Red Cross, trained in disaster work. And they were supplemented by some locals like me who volunteered their services for whatever they felt they were able to, uh, do. We worked, Saturday and Sunday included, for about 12 days and then stopped for Sunday off.

[Tape cuts off]

ML: ... the professional people will pack up their records and take them to Houston to finish up their bookkeeping about the sixteenth. I never saw a harder-working group of people than these professional Red Cross workers were. The project chairman urged us to take a little time for lunch. Take breaks. It was impossible to do for the first week or so. If we ate anything, we stood up in a little kitchenette, and ate a sandwich and gulped down a little can of juice. The thing that, uh, really got me as I approached the building the first day I went to work was the long, long line of people outside. Some of them were orderly, some disorderly. Many crying children. Barefooted people, people fairly well-dressed. All waiting in line to get into the building. The big room in the Community Center would seat about 100 people. And they would let 100 people in, sit them down, and then six at a time, bring them into the room where three of us registered as fast as we could. As fast as we registered them, they were taken back out and set in a smaller room until case workers could see them. There were about 10 case workers. It takes a long time for a full interview. Especially those from Brownwood. Sometimes it took from 30 to 45 minutes to interview one family, ascertain their needs, and what they deserved, what they had, uh, could be done for them. And sometimes simply just to listen to their problems. After about the second day, it became apparent that we might have the use of a policeman outside to keep the lines more orderly. And inside, to keep people from jumping lines. The system was changed a little each day as they, they felt a need of a change. And finally it was decided to just take the first 150 people, and then cut them off. Sometime the line was cut off by noon because we had all that we could handle in one day’s work. Many of the people, I felt, exaggerated their storm damage, but they all seemed to be needy. One of the requests was for food money because of outage, because of loss of food due to the electrical outage. What the Red Cross gave them depended upon the size of the family. The lowest voucher I saw was for $17 for three days for one person living alone. I think the largest food voucher I saw was $99 for a family of 11. Most, many of these people, especially young women, maybe with a baby or a small child, would stay there all day. First day or two, some of them stayed there all day and still couldn’t get in. Some of them came there day after day until they could get in. When it was announced the first of September that no more money would be given for food, the lines did drop off then. The Red Cross assumed the attitude that after the first of the month, people would be getting a salary check, an unemployment check, food stamps. Some means – a welfare check – would have some means of buying food without depending upon the Red Cross. In order to get money for bedding, linens, pots and pans, the house had to be surveyed. Some of these people were volunteer, well I guess they
were all volunteer surveyors. Some of them were real estate people from Baytown who gave a half-day
to go and look to see how badly a house was damaged. Some were simply amateur surveyors who could
have no difficulty looking at a house and telling whether it was there or not, and whether the roof was
there or not. If a house was just minor damage but they still claimed a great deal of water damage
and wanted furniture and clothes from the Red Cross, an appointment had to be made and a worker go. In a
few cases, uh, the worker went and nobody was home at that particular time, and the client said, “Well,
I couldn’t stay home, but if you’ll come again.”

Well if they weren’t home a second time, they simply took it for granted that they could not produce
damage sufficient for a claim, and their case was marked closed.

MM: Now is that what you were doing?

ML: All I did was register people. The Red Cross professional workers told me who I could register and
who I couldn’t. They had to prove that they lived at a Baytown address, a certain address, at the time of
the storm. If it was a destroyed house, they had to prove that they were a resident of that house. I never
came across so many Louisiana licensed drivers in my life. They were not proof that you lived in
Brownwood, or, uh, Channelview at the time of the storm.

MM: What kind of proof did they have to use?

ML: They had to have something – it could be a water bill, it could be an Entex bill. I even took some
insurance papers. One young boy simply said he did not have anything to prove that he lived there. He
finally got up. [Coughing] This young man got up and started to walk away from the table. And finally he
came back and said, “Lady, I ain’t no crook. But I can show you I live down there.”

And he got out a bail bond [laughing] piece of paper showing that he had been a guest of the Baytown
City Jail, and it did have his legal address as Baytown, and it was an August arrest. So he lived in Baytown
at the time of Alicia.

I didn’t realize there were so many single parent families with so many sad stories as I heard. One young
woman said that her husband left her with two children two days after the storm. One had three
children, and her husband had left her a few days before the storm, and she had already received an
eviction notice from the apartment that they lived in. Their, their troubles were just such that every
night when I went to bed, I would see these faces and hear these stories flash before my mind. One of
the really tragic ones was a young couple with two children – one of them a baby – that came from
Louisiana, were coming to Baytown to seek their fortune. The night of the storm, they got as far as
Bayland Park. Just got through the tunnel. Bayland Park was hard hit. It looks like a disaster area. Those
pine trees are just riddled. They parked their car at the edge of that park and stayed all night in the car
the night of the storm. The car windows were blown out, any clothing they had was drenched, and they
had just nothing. No job, no house, no nothing. A Red Cross – ; legally, I could not even register them.
But a professional Red Cross nurse took them under her wing and got them registered. And by the
second day, the little wife had a job in an eating place. He looked so frail that I just don’t know how he
would ever find a job. He just didn’t look robust enough to handle an outdoor job. Any type of work like
that.

I better turn it off.

[Tape cuts off] [10:07]
ML: There was one group that, as far as I was concerned, really wore halos. They were a group of women representing the Brethren Church who came from out-of-state and established childcare corners in both the Red Cross area and in the FEMA area. Food that was leftover from the ... from Wooster Baptist Church was brought in at noon. Sometimes it was sandwiches, and sometimes it was a pot of chili or something. They fed those children that they had in that corner, and we also, we also ate some of it in the kitchen. And about ... I think these women were sleeping on the floor of some church someplace at night. They were the sweetest little women. I never got to talk to them. Never really gotten acquainted because they were in a corner separated in the room across the hall from where I was, and there was simply no time, no time to ... I usually saw them in the restroom as they were taking a child to the restroom. Many of ...

MM: But they came as volunteers down here just for that?

ML: They came as volunteers. Their church, or else they ... Just like the Southern Baptist Convention sent all of these food trucks in, so this group of Brethren, whenever there’s a disaster, send these childcare women in. Many of these children were undernourished, or had poor food habits. And a lot of them were undisciplined. And those women had the patience of Job. Because some of those children were in that corner almost all day while their parents stood in line.

I believe that’s just about all I can think of, Mrs. Mayo.

ML: I’d like to tell you about Irene Fleming from Crosby. Irene has a retired volunteer pin that she proudly wears, and I have an idea is involved in a good many activities. But she showed up every day all day the whole time that the Red Cross headquarters was open. She arrived in time to make the coffee in the morning. She was known even to bring a bowl of tuna salad along toward the last when we had no food without going some distance for it. She lined up people, people who were disorderly, people who spoke a different language. She was a regular little martinet, and they respected her. They usually did what she told them. But she worked all day. But yet she was a very, very compassionate person. When she saw somebody that she thought was hungry, she managed to get them a few cookies or crackers. Or if it was in the morning and we had donuts, she gave them a donut. A cup of coffee. If she thought they needed to see a nurse, she was alert. I don’t believe that there was a volunteer in the whole operation that worked the hours and gave the service that Irene Fleming did.

[Tape cuts off] [13:32]

MM: September 15, 1983, talking with Jean Shepherd, President of the Brownwood Civic Association.

JS: On Monday, I had been down in Hitchcock, and I had heard about the little tropical depression that was out in the Gulf. As a matter of fact, I’d heard it Sunday that there was an area out there to be watched, but there hadn’t been much said about it until around five o’clock Monday afternoon. That would be on August the 15th. I didn’t pay much attention to it, uh, because it was still very slow, the winds were not very high. Until Tuesday, August the 16th, when they began to update it some and talk more about it as possibly strengthening and becoming a storm. In the afternoon, I believe, EOC opened on the Tuesday, the 16th, and they were talking about that they were going to put a notice on KBUK that the people in the Brownwood Subdivision or the low lying areas in Baytown, below six feet I think they were saying, were going to be asked to evacuate their area by noon Wednesday. That would be on the 17th of August. I made the comment then that I didn’t think that the people in Brownwood would hear the KBUK station. Because, for some reason or other, that’s where all of our notices come out, and we can’t get KBUK in the Brownwood subdivision. And we’ve always had to depend that that’s where we
get our information. We have repeatedly told the Civil Defense director we can’t pick up that station. And, uh, it’s because of the way its beamed, there’s an interference. And I asked if they didn’t think it was a good idea that we go out with the Civic Association’s PA systems on the car, and notify the people. At that time, Fletcher Hickerson did not want to do too much alarming, and he just ruled against it. One of the men at Civil Defense and I talked again around six o’clock. And they had decided – 6 p.m., that is – and we had decided that possibly it was a good idea that we go out with the speakers because they were so accustomed to waiting for the tide alert group in Brownwood to do the announcing of what would happen until they decided, that possibly that would be a good idea. About eight o’clock that night, I went out with the speaker and drove through the entire subdivision. This was on Tuesday the 17th, and made the announcement that they should prepare to leave, be evacuated, all the Brownwood subdivision, by noon Wednesday.

Usually it takes me about 30 minutes to drive the entire area and make the announcements. This time it took me two hours to drive through the subdivision and talk to the people because we had so many new people living in the area, that they were stopping me and trying to get more information. I talked to at least 10 families. One had just moved there within the past two weeks. Some within the past two months. Because the area had become, I would say about 65 percent rent property. And they were new. Some of ‘em said they had been up to the, on the hill to the 7-11 asking what they should do, and they didn’t know what they should do. And I asked them if they had flood insurance and they said no, they were told because they lived in the Perimeter Road, they wouldn’t need flood insurance, so what kind of preparation should he make? I told him to take out everything he loved. He said that’s his wife, all of his furniture and two dogs. But where would he get a U-Haul truck at that hour of the night? And I assured him that I thought he would have ample time, since he had until noon Wednesday to get the truck on Wednesday morning and go ahead and make his plans to leave.

Some of ‘em felt that they wouldn’t have to leave because they had been assured by realtors and landlords that they wouldn’t flood. And I was having a most difficult time convincing ‘em that the water would come up in a hurry. That the bowl – what we call the inside the Perimeter Road – could fill up when it started coming over the Perimeter Road within 45 minutes, and they wouldn’t be able to get out. And we were showing a decrease in tides instead of an increase, which was a little bit different than it had been in the past. And tried to convince the people not to stay till the water started coming over the Perimeter Road. Because then if they had to wade out, they would be bothered by snakes and also fire ants. Because the fire ants ball up in a ball trying to stay alive. And then when you ...

MM: Floating in the water?

JS: Bump ... and float in the water. And when you bump ‘em or touch ‘em, then they just spread all over you. And I know from experience, because I ... I hit some of those in Delia when I got caught in the storm in Delia.

MM: I’ve never heard that.

JS: And, um, they’re very, very harmful to your system if they cover your body, and they can. They’re just like piranhas. They just pounce on you because they’re looking for something to get out of the water. After I made the announcement, I went back home. I watched the tides all night because we didn’t know what they were doing. I was checking with the Weather Bureau in Galveston. Um, EOC had closed down. They were ... the tides were increasing in Seabrook, but they were decreasing in Brownwood. And this didn’t work right. But still all this time, the wind was still 80 miles an hour going to Matagorda. The
next morning I drove through the area. The tides were down. But some people were making their plans to evacuate. A lot of the people had evacuated by noon, but they had only evacuated with the idea that the storm was going into Matagorda at 80 miles an hour. I talked with Fletcher Hickerson at about two o’clock when we were still in the means of evacuating what we would do, and he assured me that I would probably have only six inches more water in my home than I had in Delia, which would make me have 18 inches.

So we ... we were so exhausted. My husband said, “Look, I can’t even pick up an ice cube, I’m so tired.”

So we ... about five o’clock, we determined that we were finished. We had put some things on top of the cabinet. We took out a lot. But we didn’t take out near enough. Because we had thought, well with 18 inches of water, if it gets a little bit worse than that it won’t get to the top of the cabinets, and some of these things are gonna be alright.

It was time to think about blockades because the storm had picked up some, but it was still going to Matagorda. I stopped by what we called the command post. This was in the old water district office to where we would start issuing what we called the Civil Defense stickers for people to have no more than two cars in the area of Brownwood when it was blockaded off. We have to blockade the area off to keep sight-seers out, to keep looters out, and even for the protection of the people for not having so many cars down in the area to where you can’t move around.

So at five o’clock, I went up to the command post and started working. I did not leave the command post, um, after that except to just go down in the area and check. At about 10 or 11 o’clock that night, the tides were holding pretty much steady at 3.9. They had started coming up a little bit, but they were holding. And one of the policemen and I drove down in the area just to see what the situation was. We were at what we call the Lynwood/Mapleton pump. The water – the pump that pumps the water from inside the Perimeter Road – and we looked out across Scott Bay, and it seemed like the first strong gust of wind came in at that time.

[Tape cuts off.]

When this first gust of wind came in, it immediately started capping Scott Bay. And I told the policeman then, I thought, “Oh this is gonna be a bad one. Because, and the water’s gonna come up in a hurry.” And we drove down the street just about a block when we could begin to see the trees already beginning to, um ...

MM: And what time was this?

JS: About 11 o’clock. Ten or 11 o’clock that night.

MM: At night.

JS: When we thought the first gust of the strong winds started coming in. Then by the time we drove on around to what we call the Y pump, where the tide marker is, it had already come up. About, up past four foot. Just by the time we could drive, I would say, not even a fourth of a mile. So I asked him to take me on back up to the command post because I did want to make some calls to some people that I knew that were still down there. Um ... by the time that I got back up there, the police were already reporting how fast the tide was coming up. It was just coming right on up to five feet in a hurry. I made some – and that would be putting it over the Perimeter.
MM: 4.7 puts it over …

JS: Puts it over the Perimeter Road. It started spilling over the Perimeter Road about the time I got back up to the command post. I made some calls. They said well they were gonna wait a little while. I said, “You can’t.”

Uh … It might have been later than 11 o’clock, but seemed to me like it was around 11 o’clock. But at four o’clock, I did call some people and tell ‘em to get out of there. It seemed to level off there for a while. There were still people in there at four o’clock that I knew of, and they had ...

MM: Morning, then?

JS: In the morning.

MM: Ya.

JS: And they were having a difficult time getting out of there. They had started rescuing about two and three o’clock, in some of the areas there. But some of ‘em started coming out still through what we call the interior streets, uh, MacArthur and Ridgeway. And they were still able to drive out because it was not just rushing over at that particular time. But then, by four o’clock it started really coming on in and just filled up in a hurry. But I may be confused on the time because I sort of lost all ...

MM: Everybody lost sense of time.

JS: Lost sense of time of … of exactly what time this was happening. I know I called one family, uh, they insist, they say it was 1:30 when I called them to tell them to get out. I was talking with the National Weather about every two hours. We lost our telephone at about seven o’clock in the morning, uh, Thursday morning. They were still saying that it was going in, looked like going into Matagorda. At one time, the last time I was able to talk with them, he told me that the eye was then crossing, was approaching Galveston Isle. That was two hours in between. Um … and that we could expect 15 feet of water up the Houston Ship Channel. We could no longer read the tides in our area because our tide marker only goes to five feet, and we couldn’t get down to where the tide markers were anyway. Uh … I was in checking with Exxon to get the wind velocity and the tide reading from them even though I knew we were a few tenths different up until we lost telephone conversation, uh, telephone communication.

The amphibious vehicle was gonna have to be used: the one they call the Lark or the Duck, or whatever they call it. And the Public Works men went out to get this thing started and ready to go when it wouldn’t start. We called down for a mechanic to come out and we waited, and we waited, and we waited, and we never did see the mechanic. We finally called back and talked with Norman Dykes, and he told us that the mechanic had drowned out. So in the meantime, the men from the Public Works had started working on the Lark and were able to get it started. But then they found out they had no light on this vehicle. And it’s probably a good thing they didn’t have a light, or they probably wouldn’t have gone down in these waters that they were rescuing people from.

I suppose the first family that we rescued was from West Bayshore; the only one that I remember as being the first one. They were driving out in their car. Their car was swamped. They couldn’t get out, and they were found by the Public Works Department that was down there wading, carrying their dog and their cat and what few things that they could get out. And they brought them in and I don’t know why I did this, but I knew the conditions that would be existing down in there having lived there so long. I knew what kind of wave action it would be. I knew how swift the water came over the roads. I knew
how much debris was in there. And ... I just bawled ‘em out. I mean I really lost my cool for having stayed down in there and risked their lives and risked the lives of the people going down to rescue them. And then I had to apologize to them because, I mean after all they had had a narrow escape. But that’s the way I felt.

MM: Ya.

JS: Anyone who did not heed the warning and stayed down there just because it had never happened before, really needed their knuckles rapped. And, course I took a very sensitive couple and I apologized for that and I don’t get I’ll ever do that again, but they later on agreed with me. But they had been to the airport to take their children to put on a plane to go visit their grandmother, and they had come back, had stacked their furniture and had just gone to sleep. They just stretched out to watch TV and take a nap, and they had gone to sleep.

Some of the other people that stayed down there were just plain stubborn. Just didn’t think it would happen. We started getting calls from South Burnett about five o’clock that these people needed rescuing. The man from the Public Works Department said he was not gonna go back out in the Lark unless he had some lifejackets. They didn’t even have lifejackets. Uh ... I called down to Civil Defense and they said, “Lifejackets? No we don’t have any lifejackets.”

Well, it’d been a shame to load up the Lark and have someone drown because they had no lifejackets. Or even have the operators drown because they had no lifejackets. So I left the command post and went across Bayway Drive to our shop building back there where my husband was staying, and we were able to get out of our boat five lifejackets and one ski jacket. And I took those back over to and gave them to, um, the men on the Lark. I don’t know how they maneuvered in these waters with all the trees, with all the light lines, and with the debris that was coming from the houses that were being destroyed. And they couldn’t see. They had to see from sort of a glow in the sky or some lights that would appear every now and then was the only way ... They never did explain to me how they were seeing what they were doing.

But they stayed down in there quite a bit because they knew having been down there earlier that there were still some people in there. They would go in and try to get them out. We brought out one family at four or five o’clock and brought them in. And the wife told me that her husband had refused to come out. That he had had some boats down there that belonged to some of his customers and – that she thought he had some boats down there that belonged to some of his customers – and he was gonna try to bring a boat out. I marked him off as a fatality. Because I knew the size boat that he had down there, he could not handle in that wind and water with that much debris. I talked with my husband around seven o’clock that morning, Thursday morning, and told him that his friend Leo we may as well mark off as a fatality. Because if he tried to bring that boat out, he wouldn’t make it. And he totally agreed with me. His wife came over about one o’clock Thursday, and we still had not found her husband. We did go back down in there and get him out around 2:30, Tuesday afternoon. He had stayed in the attic. He had also stood up on the cabinets. And he told us later that he had seven feet of water in his house, and he was standing on the kitchen cabinet just with his head out, wondering how much longer he would ... could hold out before he had to go back up on the roof. He’d been up on a roof, but when a tree fell and hit the roof, he decided that wasn’t a safe place so he went back in the, swam back in the house.

Um, there was another family there called O’Higgins – this was Leo Warner – the O’Higgins had stayed down there. I had marked them off as a fatality. I knew that we were gonna have three; we had never
had any before. We rescued them around 3:30, Thursday afternoon. They had stayed in the second floor of their house. And when the first floor gave way, and the second floor came down, they started swimming out. At that time they picked up four adults, two juveniles and two dogs.

[End of tape]

Transcribed by: AS 1/10/18

[Tape 2 of 2]

JS: The command post was very busy after the storm lull came in and people started wanting to go back into their homes. Of course it was absolutely impossible because there was still too much water in the area. It had not gone off the road. We were having a difficult time keep them from trying to slip in and swim in. Uh ... just desperate to get back to their house. We had several mothers that almost panicked when their sons slipped in and swam into the area to see what had happened. So we began to get early reports from these young men of what really had taken place, um, in the area. Even though the men in the boat had already told us, uh, what was happening.

Friday I left the command post, I think, seven o'clock Thursday night after having been up all day Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday. I finally did get a little bit of sleep Thursday night, but I was back at the command post Friday morning because I needed to get down in the area to see what had happened.

When I went down with Merchant, the Assistant Chief, we saw too many trees across the Perimeter Road. There was still water across the Perimeter Road. One of the houses that had been demolished was also at Mapleton and Crow. There was no way people could get down into there, so he took me back up, and I went down to Public Works. And I was somewhat upset to see them with leaf rakes sweeping, uh, the City Hall lawn when all of these trees were down and the people couldn’t get back to their homes. So we, uh ... I thought, “That’s a little bit unnecessary. I mean, why sweep up the twigs at City Hall when we need to get people down into their homes?” So we were able then to get Norman Dykes to get the crews down there with chainsaws, and start sawing off these trees because of what ... and get a maintainer or something down to push this house off the street.

Then I went down to the area, and I didn’t even recognize my own street. Merchant had to tell me that this was Lynwood Drive, because ... there were no houses, uh, there. I had been prepared in my mind for what we call studs, roof and slab – that means for the brick to be pulled off. But I was not emotionally prepared to see 45 slabs right in a vicinity.

Uh ... there was a young man there in an airboat that was getting in to look at his property, and he drove me around the area some in the airboat. I drove up in my driveway. I could still see a few things that I should have gotten out still there. This became an obsession with me to have ‘em. I went back and told Pete he had to go. He went back down there, got in the boat and got ‘em.

Uh, but we did comment at that time how much cleaner the water appeared to be than it had ever been in a storm. It was clear, clean-looking water.

Uh, there were people there within an hour after I had been down there – and we were beginning to get things cleared up – about waist deep or sometimes deeper than that, just feeling around on their slabs,
trying to find some little item that belonged to them. This was the most heartbreaking thing that I had ever seen in my life to ... And some lady would find a cup and say, “Look I found a cup to my china. We believe part of the roof is here. If we can move this, I believe we can find more.”

They were desperate, seemingly, to find something that belonged to them. Because I don’t think anybody was prepared for the wave action that just literally destroyed the homes. I went back to the command post after having driven the entire area then; counted the slabs. I really thought there was more because I hadn’t gone down Cabaniss because the water was there. And we started issuing a different kind of pass to get in. I suppose that was the most emotional Friday afternoon I’ve ever spent in my life. Because the women would say, “Now Jean, I want a pass. I’ve got to go down because I’ve put ... I need ... I just need to get one item. I won’t be down there long. I put it in the attic.”

And I would ask ‘em, “Are you alone?”

“Yes, I’m by myself.”

Well I knew they didn’t even have an attic. Uh ... and ask ‘em please don’t go down until you have someone go with you. It’s a little bit worse than Carla. The water is still in there.

They’d say, “What are you trying to tell me?”

And to tell these people ...

[Tape cuts off]

JS: To tell the people – some of ‘em had lived there since the ‘30’s – that they no longer had a home. No longer had a house that they would ... just don’t expect anything. Some of ‘em I told, “now it’s worse than Carla. Just be prepared that it’s gonna be worse than Carla, and you may not find as much as you’re expecting to find.”

It was the most draining afternoon. I told my husband later on that evening, “I don’t think I’m gonna make it.” Uh ... because it’s ... I don’t know why I felt I had to be the strong one. But there has to be someone that other people can lean on. But it took its toll, believe me.

Then I think people became angry. After they saw some of the damage, they felt that they hadn’t had enough warning. They felt that we had been too rough on ‘em in not letting ‘em get down in there. And I think that’s only natural. It’s far better that people vent their frustrations like that than it is to, um, have a nervous breakdown. The police department that was working with us, I guess, were the most understanding people that I’ve ever seen. And they were certainly the bravest that I’ve seen, um – when they had families, too, that they should be concerned about at home – to just put that aside and rescue the people and try to work with them. If we were tough on giving passes, we felt that we had to for the people’s own protection. They took a lot of verbal abuse and just kept on smiling and kept on working.

Uh...[sighs] When they were gonna have to seal the area off and put a curfew on when they realized that the sewer was going in. And then our water ceased to be clean. This is when the power came on and water came on and people on the hill then started using their sewer system again. It was dumping then raw sewage down in into the area. What fish had been caught in there were beginning to die inside the Perimeter Road. Then we saw total change of our clean water into a very health hazard. Absolutely no way to get electricity back on. Gas lines had broken, and people were trying to go to meters and cut
gas lines off. The gas company said there was absolutely no way that they could block off the entire system. That it would then fill up with water. But I think they did then get most of the gas lines cut off so that there wouldn’t be gas escaping in the area.

The city did block the water, cut off the water, because as many leaks as we had in the homes was making it difficult to pump the area out. And the city had not removed the motors from our flood pumps. And of course they were underwater and had no electricity, so they were using auxiliary pumps. It was decided that we would have to cut the Perimeter Road in two spots in order to drain. I don’t think it was the wisest place to cut it, but um. Sort of drained it uphill, but it did help, but ... Anyway, it did help, but ... I think they at least cut it on the quiet side of Crystal Bay thinking possibly if the tide came in that it would wash out maybe their fill that they had put in there. But they could’ve drained a tremendous more water if they’d a cut it over by the Mapleton Street pump, but that’s neither here nor there.

I think when the city decided to cut down – to stop permits on the Thursday night after the storm on, I believe that was on the ...

MM: Twenty-fifth?

JS: Twenty-fifth is when they decided to issue no permits. I think we had a very emotional meeting that night because people were not over the shock, and I think they were making comments possibly they didn’t mean, and ... And of course it was they had not seen insurance adjusters. They had just started coming in the area that day, and they were terrified at what was going to happen to them financially. And then the city wasn’t gonna let them have their home again. And I had talked with the city manager and told him, “I think this is premature to be talking about this,” but they felt that they had to stop permits or people would be down there trying to repair their houses the next day and not knowing the condition of the area that they’d decided they would do this. I think this was a very emotional time, uh, for people to, um, to be told that they couldn’t have permits.

Then we had a meeting Sunday. I think this was also still an emotional time, but they began to have to have the facts. I went down to the FEMA headquarters, or the assistance headquarters, and just walked through, and I didn’t see many people in there from Brownwood. On the first two days. I didn’t recognize very many of the people at all. And I talked to some of them that I did recognize. And come to find out that the area was not just for Baytown, but it was for all other areas. I saw some people from Pasadena, and Highlands, and Crosby, and La Porte, and Anahuac and Mont Belvieu. Areas that I had not really thought that had ... would be receiving, uh, aid because I was ... I suppose I’m like everybody else in town. I was totally preoccupied with my own disaster, to realize how widespread that it was.

[Phone rings]

I had talked to some of my friends, and they asked, “What do the people need?” Now this was Rosemary Thompson. And I said, “Clothes,” because the children are gonna have to start to school Monday, and they’re going to need clothes. But after having seen so many different people and for, for many different areas down at the assistance center, I asked ‘em to bring ‘em to our shop at 6202 Bayway so I could make sure that the people in our area received these clothes. She called a Medical Auxiliary, um, Mrs. Feltner, then announced it in the Presbyterian Church that Sunday, and our shop began to fill up with clothes. And I was able to contact some of the people there to come and pick them up. It was, it was very rewarding to see these people so appreciative that other people, even though they had had damage, had opened up their heart so rapidly and brought the clothes in. Because some of
'em didn’t have anything but what they had on their back. They didn’t even have a fresh change of clothes. I had been rather blunt to, uh, to the ladies about bringing clothes to saying, having been through Carla and seeing what people bring to disaster victims, “Please bring usable clothes. Something that you can wear.”

During Carla, most all of the pants – you know, pant suits were just coming in about that time – had no zippers, they had no buttons, they would be ripped under the arms. They were really not wearable. And you don’t have a needle and thread. And you don’t have a machine to make all these things. These ladies had laundered ‘em, had ‘em on hangers, and they were wearable. And that I appreciate a great deal. They didn’t even bring any evening dresses. Because that seems to be one of the things that people bring to disaster victims almost immediately, is all their evening clothes. And all their dancing slippers that they’re discarding. And ... it’s really funny when you go down to receive what we always call a care packages of what they have sent you. I know their heart was in it, probably for deductions, but it certainly wasn’t good on your back, but ... Uh, the women, the Medical Auxiliary and the ladies from the Presbyterian Church did do a fine job.

We did have some clothes brought in from Bogota and from Maybank when my sister came in. My niece had been visiting us, and she knew some of the little young boys that lived next door to us that had been swimming with her children, and she saw that they had their sizes, so they could start to school, so ... That sort of thing I busied myself with then for ... oh I’d say almost a week, seeing that the people were receiving some of these things. Some people brought dishes. And then it dawned on me, I better take care of my own life.

Uh ... we started having Civic Association meetings then in order to get more information about what benefits were available to us. I don’t think the people in Baytown realize how ... how severe the damage is in Brownwood...subdivision. They’re seeing houses like over on South Burnett that the water came up and went down, and they’re not seeing the structural damage. I think when you say you have a slab, I don’t think they’re really realizing that it’s, it’s a SLAB. It looks exactly like you were just getting ready to build a house. Uh ... we had a rent house across the street from us, it doesn’t even have the plate around it. It just looks like the slab is being prepared to, uh, to build.

Uh ... when you drive through the town, you see damage everywhere. I think we had never been hurricane tested in Baytown. I think we’re gonna have to look at not only building permits in the floodplain area, I think we’re gonna have to look at a building code. Especially on apartments where people live. That we be more hurricane prepared. Uh ... I know that there’s been a lot of comments about the people that stayed in the brown brick lounge. I think they did a good job.

[Tape cuts off. Long pause.]

JS: But there’s really nothing you can do. As far as Brownwood being a place to live, the Civic Association and the majority of the residents – I guess almost 100 percent of the homeowners – had pushed for years, for 10 years, for evacuation and relocation. We would have hoped it’d been more in an orderly fashion than it has been done now. People would have gone out with their ... all of their belongings and their things that they had cherished, rather than losing them to a flood.

But I think Alicia has caused the evacuation and relocation of the area, and I think it should be. And I think should be a park; a green belt. People do become attached to their sticks and stones and ... we do feel like sometime that this old house has absorbed vibrations of our life and holds a great deal of
memories and treasures. And that’s probably true. To us it has. But we have to turn loose of those things and face reality.

The people are saying that they want to keep their lot. They want to go back. They want to see the sunsets. They want to enjoy the lifes of the bay, um … fine. If it’s a park, they can still go back to their lot and enjoy the bay. I don’t think they’re realizing that, gosh, the city didn’t keep up our streets when we lived there. They’re not gonna keep up the streets if there’s no one living there. So how are they gonna get down to it? If they are allowed to keep their property, or if they do keep their property, they should just realistically look around ‘em. Be what good is a pretty little spot out on West Bayshore going to do you if there’s skeleton houses all the way around you? This is not going to be a pretty little spot. Because the cost of taking these houses down, what’s left of ‘em, the demolition of these houses, is going to be more than some people want to do. The debris that’s in the area, if the people are left to keep their property, how long will it take ‘em to clean it up? Uh … the vacant lots were not maintained. The city didn’t mow ‘em, and they didn’t force the owner to mow them, and they’re covered in refrigerators and washing machines and stoves and roofs and … just debris from the destroyed homes. How long would it take to clean this up if the government didn’t come in and give money for the city to go in and clean it or burn it or whatever they were gonna do with it? They’re just not being realistic about what the area’s gonna look like. We, for months to come – even if the government buys us out – it’s not gonna be the pretty little garden of Eden that some people are talking about.

The raw sewer has been running in there now for almost a month. And no telling how much longer it will run in there, and it’s being pumped out some by auxiliary pumps, and it’s soaking into the ground. Um … the dead fishes … well, that may help the area as far as that goes with the dead fish in there. But chemicals in the water that have soaked into the ground. If we could go back in there and rebuild our homes, how long would you feel safe that you could dig in the soil even to build a flowerbed with all the sewer that’s in there and other acids and things that might be in there? It’s gone. It’s just gone. The area is gone. What will we do with it? In passive recreation? Fine.

You know it was, uh … it’s a very historical spot. The Indians chose it, um, Nathaniel Lynch chose it in a Mexican land grant, uh, Rundell built the first home there in the 1837’s and it later became a residence – a residential area. Now it’s going to go back to nature again. This is a good study for universities on the … on what has happened to the land and how it’s reclaimed and all this sort of thing. There’s all sort of ecology things that could be studied there. Um … but it’s not a good place to live. Because we had long since passed the dangers of hurricanes in Brownwood subdivision. Anyone living on the Texas Gulf Coast must contend with hurricanes. But we had reached the point that if we had a three-day strong southeast wind, some homes would flood. So we just totally became preoccupied with weather living there. Because on Easter Sundays, we have evacuated. Where other people thought it was just a breezy, nice, sunny day. We have evacuated on Christmas Eve. Uh, we have been … there has been no seasonal time for evacuation in Brownwood. It has been any time that a strong southeast wind comes and builds the water up in the upper reaches of Galveston Bay, and that is Scott, Christian and Burnett.

For the past three years we’ve had southwest winds, which has kept us in low tides. After the bond issue failed where the city was going to be the sponsors for evacuation and relocation of the residents bond issue – they put it to a vote of the people and this bond issue failed in 1980. Then some of the home owners who really could afford it, or felt that they could, sold their homes at a very distressed price. Some of the people who bought after 1980 has never seen the strong southeast winds. They don’t understand. They don’t understand subsidence. Uh … they found a 2,700 square-foot home for $17,000.
They could afford to have a home in a, what they thought was a nice area. Some people were beginning to clean up the area. We were always trying to have some form, uh ... semblance of dignified living there. It was most difficult. Because the rent property brought in an element that we weren’t accustomed to in the area.

Some of these streets became what I call the slum landlord area. They would patch up, and -- or not patch up -- or ... And people were desperate for a place to live at reasonable rent. Some of ‘em with very reasonable, but ... It just brought an element that we weren’t accustomed to.

We would continue to have pride of ownership days to clean up. So many of the people were totally preoccupied with old junk cars, and we couldn’t get ‘em out of the area. And I think some of the -- and you can go down there now and see how they just buried into the ground. I think Baytown should look at enforcing their codes in every area of this city to keep it as clean and as neat as they can so there will never be another Brownwood in Baytown. The Civic Association had worked hard in the creation of the Subsidence Control District. So that when we did leave Brownwood, we wouldn’t have this happen to us again. We were the first area to get flood insurance in Texas in 1969. We had pushed for many things for the betterment of the area. And I hope that our city fathers look at this area and say, “We’ll never let this happen again, and we’ll enforce codes all over this city. We’ve been hurricane tested.” Uh ... I think they will look at every time they have a Civil Defense drill now, they will stop drilling on an explosion of a train, and do more of a drill on really rescuing and saving ... and of hurricanes, and have themselves prepared in their equipment.

Being at the command post, with the Public Works Department and the police, they each had their radios and their bands. It was ... it almost became like a video game in your own mind if you were listening to what was going on in the other part of the city. You would get this report that there is a ... there’s a metal building going down North Main in front of Lowe’s. And immediately there is a small building going down Garth in front of Furrow’s. There’s three campers going down Defee from Pat Hood. You could just see all of these little buildings moving around as if, you know, some creature was coming along, catch ‘em, eat ‘em up.

It began to ... in your own mind I thought, “My God, we’re having a video game all over town with these things,” you know, just running all over. We’d got a report that there was a tornado in Roseland Oaks. Um ... you would hear the men talking to each other, um ... We were having ... they had to go cut a tree to get an ambulance out so that could go somewhere. Medical calls for generators for life support medical cases. Uh, and then you would hear the men in Public Works saying, “Well I can’t go this way. There’s a tree down.”

Other ones say, “Well, you can’t go this way. There’s a wire just come down. Uh, you may have to work your way back and forth.”

And you could hear, the men talking of the dangerous things that was happening to the city. Uh ... and they were out trying to rescue people. People beginning to be upset when they didn’t get to them soon enough. Uh ... I guess it was really a blessing when people lost their phone service. [Laughing] Because we may have saved some lives in the Public Works Department. People getting a little upset the next morning, um, because they couldn’t cut the tree off the driveway for ‘em. When all they had to do ... they had all they could do trying to clear the street so people could get through the city to see what had happened to their business or what else. But some people did become a little unreasonable wanting
their own driveways cleaned. I don’t know why they didn’t think they couldn’t clean ‘em themselves, but, uh...

But to sit there all night, and hear what was going on in Baytown was terrifying. Because you would see this apartment has now had damage. This apartment has now had damage. Uh ... you just didn’t know what was gonna be left of your city when it was over.

MM: Were you aware of a change in pressure that you felt?

JS: No.

MM: Ok, the policeman told me that along about seven or eight the next morning, Thursday morning, they were out around 146, and said all of the sudden, their ears just started hurting so bad. Said there was nothing they could do to make the pressure right. They chewed gum, they ...

JS: Mmm-hmm...this could possibly have been due to some of the tornados that was in the area, which causes a change of pressure. But I was not aware of the pressure change.

MM: Nobody else had mentioned it to us.

JS: But this could have been because it was over in that area that the tornados were flipping around. So this could certainly have been from the tornados.

Um ... we did, I ... going back to the command post, the noise...was unbelievable.

MM: The wind blowing, you mean?

JS: The wind. The noise that the wind brought. We lost the roof of the command point, command post, um. And it went under my car, and I got out there and pulled it out from underneath my car. And then took my car across the street. But there was little pebbles. Something was hitting me. At first I thought it was glass. Maybe I’d shattered all the windows in my car. But from these roofs that have little pebbles on ‘em, the pebbles were blowing through the air. I get to thinking now about running back and forth across the street, then I think I must have been some sort of a nut. But, because things were flying in the air. But you do, I guess, what you think you have to do, and you don’t pay any attention to it.

But ... the sounds, or the wind, the roars, the different noises that I heard were not during some of the normal storms that we have had. So I’m sure that these were tornados going overhead because, uh, they were different. And uh, but I was not aware of any pressure change. But I’m sure that was due to, due to tornados. But they was round in that area.

MM: Goodness.

[Tape cuts off 28:35]

JS: There’s been a lot of talk in Baytown about storms that have happened here. Of course, living in Brownwood, I’ve evacuated many, many times. I was not living here in the ‘40’s when they talk about the storm of ‘43. I believe it was 1943 that they’re talking about, that the area of Brownwood flooded. And everyone seems to think it had a history of flooding, but it didn’t. Uh ... the ... there was also a storm in the ‘50’s – I believe it was called Debra – that put a little water in the Baytown area. And then there was one in ’63. I believe it was a Cindy, a storm called Cindy, um, that the people in Brownwood had to evacuate from. But that was at the time that we were not aware of subsidence. There’s some talk that
this storm was more severe than Carla; it did more structural damage. It had a 10-foot tide, Carla had a 17-foot tide. But Carla was in 1961, this was in ...

MM: I think that was in [Inaudible]. I don’t think that will make any difference.

JS: Carla was in 1961, and it was after that that the petrochemical industry along the ship channel began to build and build and build, and that’s when subsidence accelerated. So a 10-foot tide with wave action, um, did more damage than the 17-foot tide did in Carla. More structural damage.

We had more of a direct hit with Alicia than we did with Carla. Carla went down below Freeport. Uh, Alicia came in across Galveston. This gave us a direct hit, and we felt more of the tidal surges and more of the full winds. The winds, I believe, were higher. But this storm traveled slow. And that was a longer duration for the tides to be pushed up, and a longer time that the winds blew. And, uh, this is what caused the damage.

The tree damage, in my opinion, in Baytown was that we had had weeks of rain prior to Alicia. The ground was soft. And then you take 105 to 110 mile an hour winds, then the trees just toppled. Um, I think that had it been drier prior to that, we wouldn’t have seen the tree damage that we saw in Baytown at this time. I suppose the first recorded storm that we know of to hit Baytown was the storm of this area was the storm in 1875 that came up the ship channel.

Being an amateur historian and researching these sort of things, there was this terrible storm of September of 1875. The one that they say washed out Indianola. Just took that town away, which is quite a ways down from Galveston. But in all of the newspaper articles, uh, and the diaries and things that you can read, 1875 storm took away the West Store, which was then located at Bay Town. Two words. The Bay Town landing. And their store … they were clinging to the roof of their store when they went above up toward the San Jacinto River.

[End of tape]

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