An Oral History Tape Transcription
Of
Memories of Hurricane Alicia
Interviewer: Martha Mayo
Interviewees: Jean Shepherd, Leon Warner, Fletcher Hickerson
1983
JS: ... they’d come in from the lighthouse and was on the roof with the Wests. They lost some of their children. And after the lull of the storm, of course, they came back down, so that means some sort of an eye or the backlash that they call it brought them back downstream or when the tide started going out. And the roof of this house hit around Morgan’s Point. And the men – a ship that had gone aground there at Morgan’s Point – heard a moaning, and they went over there and they rescued Mrs. West from this roof and took her into their tug or their boat or whatever it was, and delivered a baby within 30 minutes after they had brought her off of this roof. She was pregnant. Mrs. West died in childbirth, and the child was named Charles Storm West ... um, after that. But it absolutely wiped out Lynchburg with this storm. All of the hotels and all the business. So that was one severe storm that happened here.

I think the 1900 storm did damage up here because that was a direct hit. The 1915 storm did damage here. But we didn’t have the population and the growth that we have now. There’s not much mention of Baytown.

But as I can repeat and say that subsidence has taken at least 10 feet of the elevation of Brownwood. And that’s ... you can sit in your home and look up at your ceiling, and you can say that where my ceiling is now is once where my slab was. That’s the best way I can describe the loss of elevation. It’s not something that opens up like a sink hole, like we hear about that’s happened down in Fort Bend County. It’s not like the opening of the salt caverns or ... that suddenly opens a big hole. It’s a gradual going down or compaction of the soil. We were not bothered with cracking of slabs. It was just an easy going down. But year to year we can see this.

This has happened all over Harris County. With each storm, I think we’re going to see more areas covered with water. I think we’re going to see more areas covered with rain freshwater flooding. Because subsidence alters your drainage. And, uh ... if we don’t do some corrective measures then, as we have done here in Baytown, then we’re not gonna have a good place to live along the Gulf Coast. Ever.

I think they’re beginning to see in Galveston now that they’re going to have to tighten down where they let apartments and condominiums be built. I think you can even see that down at the Padre Island. Because it’s been so long since the Gulf Coast has been hit by these severe storms. And it’s not IF it happens again, it’s WHEN it happens again. We knew all along that sooner or later there would be a storm that would wipe us out. We just didn’t know when. But you’re never emotionally prepared for the damage that it does. And it’s gonna happen again.

Some of ‘em were very small storms and minor storms like the one in 1943. And there’s different types of storms. There’s one that come in with a lot of rain. One that comes in with tidal surges. One that comes in with wind and spins off tornadoes, and you never know what it’s going to bring you.

But this is not new to the Baytown area. They lost a ... we have not lost lives because we do have a warning system. Back in the 1800’s and in the early 1900’s they had no warning systems. They were just there. Some of the people I think could tell. I think people who’ve lived on the coast very long can begin to tell by nature. Certain birds start coming in.

We had a lot of people that lived on the bay in Brownwood. Lived there 10 to 15 years. And they never learned whether the tide was coming in or going out. They would call and say, “What’s the tide doing?” And you could say, “What’s it in the front yard?” “Oh.” I mean, they had a better tide gauge than those of us living in did. A tide can come up and be very flat and very smooth, and it can come on up and flood a home. But if there wasn’t some ripples or some things like that going on, and they wouldn’t realize
this. So I think there has to be still a lot of education when you’re living on the water. And you better learn signs that tell you that storms are brewing. Because nature does tell you. Even your small animals tell you. Your dogs tell you. They feel, they become nervous and excited. They seem to sense the danger long before you do. But that’s the way the old timers could tell if they were ...

Goose Creek during the 1875 storm was a shelter for a lot of the steamers that came up in Goose Creek that weren’t harmed. So many of them were wrecked that stayed out in the San Jacinto and up in Buffalo Bayou. But they were desperate for food, they were desperate for water, and I think they kind of experienced this during Alicia.

We had no power, no electricity. For a while we were going to be allowed five gallons of water a day because our water plant was … destroyed until they could get electricity to do the pumps. I think we found out what they mean now when they say, “Have some canned foods, draw up some water.” And I think these things were … “Have some candles. Have some sort of preparations made.” Because our convenience stores didn’t have, um … they soon sold out of things; we were not having power for cooking, we were not having power for the operation of our grocery stores that we could go in and buy.

So I think we could see that we could be in very serious condition if we don’t start making plans for the next storm.

Unidentified: Yea...

[Tape cuts out]

… on our first rescue that I did lose my temper and say, “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” for staying down there. And that you risked your life, and you have risked the life of these police and the public works department and you should have heeded the warnings. I know I said this, and this is the way I feel. But I also, I suppose I can understand ‘em in a way. Because it’s animal instinct to protect your home. And man is animal, and he has the same instinct: I must stay here and protect my home. And I can understand this to, to a degree. But stubbornness? No. Cause some of ‘em said, “I’m gonna ride it out. I want to see what it’s like.” And they found out.

I … one of the men that stayed in said when he hears hurricane in the Gulf, he’s leaving. Long before it gets here. A lot of the people that stayed even in Baytown on the higher ground, say that they’ve been told that if you’re on high ground, stay put and don’t interfere with the people evacuating. And they assure me that they’re not going to interfere with them. They’re going to be way ahead of ‘em because I think the people who had all sorts of damage to their home don’t want to go through that anymore. But I do … I can understand people wanting to stay and protect their property or protect their home. But when you’re living in a dangerous area, no I do not.

But I do think because the tides went up and came down and stayed out a long time that people had a … and it was not until wee hours of the morning that we heard that this thing was not going into Matagorda. I’m not exactly sure when they heard it. I know that two hours before – when I was talking to National Weather and two hours later it was on Galveston – I don’t know whether they temporarily lost the storm or what. Which they could. They do a lot of times when it gets to approaching land. I know they were having trouble with their radar, and they were losing power, too, so it’s highly possible that they sort of lost the location of the storm for a while.

[Tape cuts out]

LW: I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s a tail or not, but you start off down there whenever it come in, of course I never figured that Alicia would ever do the damage that she did when she come in there. I don’t think anybody did.

MM: I think that’s right.

LW: I’ve loaded my furniture five times down there. And I’ve never had water in my yard. So ...

MM: Now what address did you live at?

LW: I lived at 143 Ridge Way. Right on Bayshore there at the Perimeter Road. Right on the corner. But, uh, I never figured it’d come in and do the damage it did. In fact, the last I heard from the weather people over there that she was going in between Matagorda and Palacios. And I think that’s what everybody heard, the same thing I did, from talking to other people. So I just think that we WERE a little misinformed by the Weather Bureau on that.

But it come in over Galveston at 1:40, and it wasn’t supposed to be anywhere to hit land before 6:40 in the morning. I went ahead and – course the kids were up – and I said, “Well if anything happens, or they come down here with the emergency vehicles, well, y’all go ahead and wake me up.” And I just laid down and went to sleep. Because when they said Matagorda and Palacios, I didn’t … course their calculation of what six-and-a-half foot tide would be to me, and I said, “Well I’m gonna have two-and-a-half foot of water in the house.” So I put everything up at that level.

Then about 2:30, in the morning, they come down there with the Amphib the Civil Defense did, and told us that we had 15 to 30 minutes to get out. That they had a tide surge coming in of eight-and-a-half to 10 feet. So, they were pretty good at guessing that now, ‘cause it was about 3:10, 3:15 I guess. At this time, still no rain. There was no rain whatsoever. Because my son and I walked outside, and we looked, and it was in the people’s yard next door. And I said, “Well I guess we need to start gathering up some things and get out of here.” And before we could get back to the back room to the back of the house over there and head back up, well the water had already come in the house. And then the Amphib come down there and took them out about 3:30 I guess, and it was already knee deep.

And still high winds, but no rain. Hadn’t had any rain yet. But whenever she came, she came in there. ‘Course I stayed down there all night long. And when they left, I got up on the table in a chair. The dog and myself. He didn’t leave either, so … I think he about drowned me. But when the water come up past the table, and he decided he was gonna take a stroll, well, it upset the table and there I was in the water swimming in the house. And at that time it was about four-and-a-half feet in there.

MM: Oh my goodness.

LW: So I got ahold of the freezer, which was floating, and I got on top of it. He decided he wanted there, too, and he dumped that over, and then I ...

MM: Is this a big dog?
LW: Oh, no it was a ... I guess he weighs 30-40 pounds, but just enough to ... I got to the cabinet, and I climbed up on the cabinet and got me a chair and sit in it with my news. And I was holding on to the back of the chair, and it was blowing out there. I can ... you could just see it. You know, it was blowing.

MM: And your electricity was gone by then?

LW: It was gone at 2:42 in the morning. That’s what time the clock on the stove said when it went out. But I stayed right there in that chair, watching. I never thought about any snakes or anything else up until that time. And in the top of my cabinet up there, I had a flashlight. And so I got the flashlight out and was looking around. ‘Course all my belongings and everything, you know, were floating in the house. Things that were in the kitchen are in the bedroom, and things were in the bedroom were coming into the kitchen. And it’s just, you know, totally destroyed.

MM: Your windows were gone?

LW: The windows were still intact in the house. But sometime up in the morning hours - I couldn’t tell because even when it was daylight, it wasn’t daylight - but you could distinguish outside things moving down the street that, you know, shouldn’t have been there.

MM: Like what?

LW: Uh ... well, there were some tops of some houses moving down through there, and there was a couple of small boats that was going down where used to be the street. And you could watch the wind outside and it’d just lay the trees over before it would break ‘em off. And some of ‘em just bent. Just almost touching the ground. And I would say, judging by the wind, that it was in excess of 100 miles an hour. And it got to a seven-and-a-half foot level in the house, and I busted out a window, there by the kitchen. And I figured seven-and-a-half foot, I only got a half a foot to go, you know. I said [Inaudible]. So I said I’m not gonna be able to breathe here pretty shortly. So when it got up to the halfway point at the very topmost part of the window, I broke it out, and I swum out, and I got up on top of the roof. And I stayed up there ...

MM: The dog came out, too?

LW: No, the dog ... sometime during the night I heard him yelping in the back, and I remember thinking in my mind, “Well, I guess he drowned.” And so I went on up on top of the house, and I was up there I don’t know how long. Seemed like an eternity to me, but ...

MM: And this was on the roof?

LW: I was on the roof. I was hanging onto a stack on top of the house over there where a vent pipe come through. And it was blowing so hard, and the wind was hitting me so hard it was stinging me. Then the neighbor’s tree next door fell on the house. Course I couldn’t see that, it was too dark. But I knew that something jarred the house, and the first thing I thought about, is one of the barges got loose in the bay out there and floated out there. Cause we were just an extension from the bay. We were seven foot, you know.

MM: Ya.

LW: So I so I figured a barge had hit the house or something. I really couldn’t tell, but ... Things were whistling over the top of my head because I was on the leeward side of the house, and they were
whistling over my head so fast. I said, “Well ... I’m gonna die up here, so I better go back in the house.” And when I went back into the house, well I got the flashlight and I started looking around, and ...

MM: You had to swim in I guess, didn’t you?

LW: Oh ya, I ... you had to swim in. It was still high.

MM: How high was the water when you got back in the house?

LW: It was still seven-and-a-half feet. It never come any higher, but I wasn’t gonna take any chances. But better than staying on top of the roof after the tree fell on the house, though. And I said, ‘Well I’m gonna be a whole lot better off if I just go back in the house.” Because it didn’t bust out any windows except in the back part of the house. And I imagine it was debris that busted that out. But it’s a little ... it feels a little bit funny because you’re sitting in your house there, and you’ve got the wave action, and the wave action was hitting the top of the ceiling. And it’s kind of like being in a fish bowl. You know, you can imagine how a fish feels, because it was just ...

MM: Did you get covered with water at any time? I mean when this wave action came up did it hit your face?

LW: Oh ya, it would get up to my neck. But I was up as high as I could get. And I was just kind of in a stooped position on the chair. But, uh ... it’s like being in a fish bowl. You know, you can imagine being in an aquarium like one of these covered underground things you walk in up under. That’s what it looked like to me inside of the house. And course my furniture was floating out of the door ‘cause whenever my wife and them left – they left about 3:30 on the Amphib – uh, they left the door open. And then it knocked the front door open. And a lot of the stuff was floating out, and I remember towards the latter part of the afternoon just before I got rescued ... ‘Course I, you know, I done my share of crying. I lost 19 years down there, so ... I was watching it, and all of the stuff in my house just ... you know, it was just unbelievable, and I know it’s material things, but people never understand until they’ve either been through a flood or a fire that destroyed everything they got. So ... there at the last part of it, I remember the Tupperware was floating out of the cabinet, and I was trying to save the Tupperware.

MM: [Inaudible]

LW: I was throwing it way over into one corner of the dining room over there because the windows were still intact. And ... I don’t know, it ... many, many times ... I’m not a real religious person, but I tell you what: when that water was coming up, and it was coming up fast, I done my share of praying down there that night.

MM: I guess you did.

LW: Because, now as far as being scared, I don’t really think I was that scared until the water come up. The wind and none of that I don’t think ever bothered me. Even when I got up on top of the house, you know, I was using pretty good judgement and sense.

MM: Ya.

LW: But then when I got back in, I saw the first snake. Then I used that ... the rest of the time that I was down in there I used it like a searchlight. And I threwed about, oh, five copperheads out the window.

MM: They were swimming?
LW: I had a piece of quarter round. They were just swimming. They were trying to get where I was, you know, and I didn’t really blame ‘em, but I didn’t want ‘em there.

MM: [Laughs]

LW: So as they swum up, I had a – we had just got through remodeling in there – and I had a piece of quarter round that I hadn’t put down that was about four feet long. And as they swam through the water I’d get ‘em under their belly, and I’d flip ‘em out the window. So it just, uh … I don’t know. It’s an experience I wouldn’t take a million dollars for, but I wouldn’t give 15 cents to go through another one. There’s just no way. It’s bad for … you’re displaced, you don’t have, uh … everybody’s well-meaning, I know, but, uh … well-meaning at that time didn’t mean a whole lot to me. ‘Course the only thing I thought about whenever I come down out of Brownwood was to get my family together and see what kind of remnants of our life we can put back together again.

MM: What time did you come out of there?

LW: It was 3:30 in the afternoon. The storm was over. The water was down to around three feet, three-and-a-half feet. And they rescued me in a little small aluminum boat. Now the, uh, Civil Defense come down there.

MM: Bless your heart. What’s remaining of your house?

LW: The house is totally intact.

MM: Oh!

LW: There’s probably … maybe five, six busted windows. The doors, cabinets, everything you know, is warped on it. But the house is totally intact. There’s no damage. But some people down there they have slab. That’s all they got left.

MM: That’s what I understand.

LW: And down on, uh … the perimeter road, on Crow Road, and all them houses are destroyed. I guess sometime around – the best I could judge – probably 6:30, 7:00 in the morning there was a tornado come through there because I heard it. I been through one one time before when I was working for Brown & Root. And it just sounds like a, just a big old roaring train come through. And you can feel it whenever it come through because it emptied three to four inches of water out of the house. Just pulled it out. And I couldn’t tell how close it was, but it was just kind of a deafening roar. Just …

MM: Hurt your ears?

LW: If you ever been up in an airplane. And your ears just, kinda, just pop.

MM: I heard this from the policeman over on 146, that all of the sudden their ears just hurt. They just couldn’t get it … make their ears feel right. And it was along about 7:00 or 8:00 over down there.

LW: It’s just like you’re pulling a vacuum on something. And … it was over very quick. But, uh, you can see the evidence down if you go down Millner, down around Bayshore around there, because the houses are totally destroyed. Yet there’ll be kind of a staggered pattern in the houses. All those sustained damage and don’t have walls anymore, they’re not rubble. There’s 10, 12 houses down there just laid to waste. I mean there’s nothing left but the slab and a pile of lumber where it used to be. No upright studs, no anything. So … uh, I’m pretty well convinced it was a tornado come through there, too.
Which I guess it normal. They usually do that. But when I heard it come through, I was on my p’s and q’s because, although that brick house, you know, huh. Figured it’d huff and puff and blow the house down.

MM: Well it … a number of building it has … have had the bricks blown off of them.

LW: Ya they’re just … they’re pulled off. And you can tell where one passed in ‘cause it just sucks everything into the center. And there’s just land and rubble right there. You know, there’s nothing out there. It wasn’t … you got to figure everything that’s left was in the water. And it was picking up the water with it. Because when it passed, like I said, it pulled three to four inches out of the house. You could tell it. But you still had heavy wave action even on up in the morning when the winds were the high. When it would blow real hard. I mean it was blowing hard now, ‘cause I was … it blowed my car out of the garage and up into my yard. One car I had in the garage, and it broke the garage door down and come out into my yard. And I had a 20-foot boat there that I had filled up with water because that’s what I’ve always been told. It was sitting on the trailer, and it floated it two lots over from me.

MM: My goodness.

LW: Things that moved that you wouldn’t even imagine would move, moved. I had three big tool cabinets loaded with tools that were made out of wood. I’ve got one left. The other two I hadn’t even found. I’ve searched all over Brownwood ‘cause I had a ton of parts and tools in there, and I’m trying to retrieve what I can. But if you go down there … my insurance lapsed on the 12th. And the storm come in on the 18th. So I was only six days out. But, uh, it was a decision that you make, and money’s been tight anyway, so I paid the light bill instead of paying the insurance payment. I don’t think I’d ever do that again, either. I think I’d do without eating before I paid my insurance. But … you have no idea how, you know … and I’m not the only one. There’s many a family down there now that’s misplaced. Now some of ‘em gonna come out real good, but on the whole, you know, the people have been down there for years. And the people that own their homes and have paid for ‘em – and I know of three or four that’d been paying on the houses for 20 years and just paid them off the last two or three months. I feel real sorry for them people ‘cause now these people are getting up in age, and they got to start all over again, and they got 30 years. And the insurance ain’t gonna cover their loss. It never does. I don’t care if it’s now or in the future. If you ever look back, you’re insurance not gonna do it. There’s a man down there I know of personally that has $76,000 worth of insurance, and they’ve offered him $4,600 in wind damage. I was down there, and I know of course, that the wind was there before the water was. The wind got there first. Uh, we had heavy winds when it was only knee deep in my house. So I know that they’re taking a beating on that. And they can’t replace it.

MM: Right.

LW: Some people down there owe seven years on a house. Some three or four. And then, you know, you got some people down there that run in there and bought them houses for $10,000, and they didn’t have nothing invested in ‘em. No time. I lived there for six years. I enjoyed it. It was peaceful. It was beautiful down there. Uh … we knew that there was always that chance that it would come in. But if you’d told me a week before that that a hurricane was gonna come in there and destroy everything everybody had in Brownwood, I’d have never believed it. You could not have convinced me if you had got on a soapbox. But it did. I mean, six years we’d been threatened, uh … and then just the sudden overnight it’ll do it. People had better get their things together. The worst I’ve ever seen. Like this if you’ve ever been into Brownwood there’s maybe some more pictures that Betty brought home.

MM: These poor homes.
LW: It’s bad. I mean, it looks ... it’s bad down there.

MM: I’d like to get one of these, too. How high was the water when they ... when you finally left? I’m trying to guess that.

LW: Three feet.

MM: I wonder when it finally all went out [inaudible].

LW: Uh ... At my house it went out ... the same day about 6:00 that afternoon. And then some parts of it – what was in the bowl ‘cause there was kind of a bowl down there ...

MM: [Inaudible] in a road.

LW: It was two weeks. Because the pumps weren’t working. They didn’t have any pumps working to pump it out of the bowl. And they tried unsuccessfully seven times to bring some pumps down there to pump it out, and it just took a long time sending people down there. Just didn’t get in there as quickly as they should have. Even through all of it, I went in there, and I saved quite a bit of my stuff. It was a have-to situation. My washer and dryer is working good. I cleaned it ...

MM: Even though they had the water in it?

LW: Seven-and-a-half feet of water. Because I was down there trying to save what I could. And I pulled it out, and took it to a car wash, and put WD-40 on it, and cleaned it up. Took it home. Let it dry out a couple hours, and plugged it in. It’s been working ever since. My TV set, I saved it. Flushed it all out with fresh water, and took it over there and let it sit for about four days. Plugged it in, and she’s playing. I don’t have all the channels I should because I got a Century Tech remote control, and of course the remote control was shorted out ‘cause it had a battery in it. But, uh ... I saved – I feel fortunate – I saved quite a bit of my stuff that was down in there. But you just figure, you know, you wanna ... if it goes out tomorrow, you can’t say anything. We were unable to save any clothes. Because the clothes were just ... they were stained so bad, that you couldn’t do anything with ‘em. We did save dishes, and pots and pans and stuff like that that we sanitized and were able to use. But clothes, huh, there was no way. Everything that was in the closet on hangers is all rusted. The hangers rusted and ruined the clothes.

MM: Oh, yes. I hadn’t thought about that.

LW: But it was just a ... it was a nightmare. It really was a nightmare.

MM: Oh my goodness.

LW: Well, it come to life. You know, it ... when you’re living it – that’s what so bad – you pinch yourself, and you know this is happening. This is it. This is what you’ve been a-scared of. And you [inaudible] stayed here. To watch it. [Laughter] But I was coming out at ... whenever they come down and picked up my wife and kids, I was still ... I was bare footed. And I was walking down the hall, and the water was – I couldn’t see what was on the floor – and I kept stepping on things, and the jellyfish were in the house, and you could see ‘em lighting up in the water. You know, they were just a real luminous blue light. And one of ‘em got on my foot, and it stung me, and I was mad, and I was ... The rest of my family’s already to the front part of the house, and they was hollering for ‘em to come on out cause the rain was coming down by this time heavy. And there was a tree blocking the door, and they moved it. And then they got on out and they were hollering for me, and I was getting mad, and told them I said, ‘Well y’all just go on. Just take off, and I’ll be fine. I’ll fend for myself.” And I knew I was
gonna do what I had to to survive, you know. There wasn't no doubt about that, but it was touch-and-go down there.

[End of tape]

Transcribed by: AS 1/8/18

[Tape 2 of 2]

MM: ... the dog again? Did he drown?

LW: Oh no, the dog come back swimming in because, now by this time I was already snake shot, you know, and I'm looking. And ... and sometime just before they rescued me, I could hear 'em, I could hear something splashing. And, you know, after seeing the snakes, I ... Jesus, what's coming down here now, you know. And I shined it, and I saw his eyes first in the dark, you know, and here he is. So I guess he found a mattress or a piece of furniture or something to get up on. But, uh, I just almost sure he'd died during the night 'cause I heard him holler a couple of times, and then it was just quiet. And then I was in there three or four hours after that. So I ...

MM: I bet you were glad to see him.

LW: Oh, ya, ya. And then the fool got up between me and the kitchen cabinets over there, and he was trying to get close, and he liked to shove my chair off in the water again. And I didn't know at that time if I wanted to go ahead and save him, or just drown him myself. Because I had a pretty small perch. And just a little island out there, and they had that chair, see, and it took all the room. But when he come by I grabbed him by the collar and set him up on the cabinet, and then he got between the cabinets and the chair. And he just went to pushing, you know. And I figured he was gonna dump me off in the water over there. But, uh ... whenever we come out, the a ... the Civil Defense when I stepped on there, it was about a four-foot water moccasin climbing up the side of my car. That one of 'em was still in the driveway. And he was gonna shoot it, and I remember telling him. I said, you know, I don't know what I was thinking about. The car was ruined anyway. And I says, "You gonna blow my windows out of my car. I don't want the snake shot." And I said, "Just let him go." So we went on up, and we were looking for some more people that were supposedly down in there, in a three-story house up on Bayshore. And we went down there and we hollered and hollered, but nobody ever answered so I guess they got to them earlier. 'Cause whenever I come out ... course some people down there, you know, I mean they just standing out there looking. Course you had newspaper reporters and everybody else you gotta wade through them. And just kind of a big ol' crowd up there, but ... there was still one man down in there. He's Joe Golden that runs the garage up on Bayway that ... uh, he must have come out the same time I did, or I don't know if he went back in. Because, like I say, the storm was over. But he was walking through the water with a stick, you know, just checking out the snakes out there because they were ... there were lot of snakes out there.

MM: Well, are you the one that they knew you were in your house by seeing your cigarette? The light in your cigarette?

LW: No, they might have thought that. I had a lantern in there. No, I had a lantern. A kerosene lantern.

MM: But that's how they knew you were ... that's how they could find you.
LW: That’s how they knew I was ... when they come down there, see I had it sitting on top of the freezer. They didn’t get down in here till about 3:30. It was ... oh, I guess 2:45 or so when the lights went out. So, you know, we ... we went and got our candles, and our oil for our lamps, and filled up the bathtub with water. That was a joke.

[Laughter]

MM: Here, put a little more water in your house. [Laughter]

LW: It just ... you know, and I just had food floating everywhere. The ... everything in the freezer, everything come out.

MM: Did your family think that perhaps you hadn’t made it?

LW: I ... when I come out, they were pretty excited to see me.

MM: I bet they were.

LW: But, uh, you had to be down there. It was ... It was bad down there. Uh, halfway through it, you know, ‘course I ... after things come up past five foot, where I had most of my stuff put to a level to, then I’d a wished I’d got outta there. I wished I’d awented ahead and left. But I had to try, you know.

MM: Well, ya.

LW: If the stupid Weather Bureau would have been right, you know, and we got a six-foot tide, well, I’d a been in fair shape. I’d a still lost a lot of stuff, but I’d been in fair shape anyway. So ... ‘course by the time they decided it was coming, it was too late to save anything. And when I got up and they come down there at 2:30 in the morning, it was too late to even get my cars out. Because Perimeter road was already under water. So I’d of never even got my cars out. But next time they say “hurricane” to me and I do not intend to leave Texas, uh, I’m gonna say, “Where, Mexico?” I’m gone. I’m not gonna take no chances on ‘em. I don’t believe that they can predict the weather as well as they think they can. And, uh, we got some bad information on this one. All the rest of ‘em, they’ve done a pretty fair job. But I understand that they lost the radar over in ...

MM: [Inaudible]

LW: Ya, but how do you miss a storm by 300 miles? You know that’s pretty bad tracking. I don’t care who you are. And that eye come right over Galveston Island over there at 1:40. I mean, that’s a pretty far miss from Matagorda.

MM: It is.

LW: So I don’t ... they’re just human. You just say, “human error,” is all you can say. The only person I can blame for not getting out of there is me. Because we knew it was coming, we just didn’t know where. But after you’ve loaded your things up over there three or four times, and then you’ve got the expense of a truck sitting in your yard for three days, you know, waiting for something to happen. Then it don’t, and then you unload it. You do that enough times, you’re gonna destroy your furniture anyway. So I just said, well ... I was in a real passive mood, too, I guess.

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[Tape pauses.]
MM: I’m talking with Fletcher Hickerson, Coordinator of Emergency Preparedness for the City of Baytown.

[Pause]

FH: Baytown’s been active in preparation for a hurricane for quite a number of years. For the past 10 years, we have printed elevation and brochures on hurricane information for Baytown. The information give ... the brochures give information on the elevations throughout the city with the elevations below 15 feet in red, and then there are five-foot contours on there: five, 10, 15, 20, and 25-foot contours. Along with it is the plan, which briefly is that we would evacuate all areas likely to be flooded, and people in mobile homes should move to safe location within the city. And that we would give instruction over KBUK. So, those preparations were in place, and the hurricane really wasn’t a hurricane until sometime on Wednesday. We did have a hurricane warning ... hold that just a minute, would you?

FH: We received a hurricane warning from the National Weather Service on Tuesday evening, August 16, about 5:00 p.m. We immediately put out a warning to the public and over the local radio stations and the Emergency Broadcasting System in Houston. We said that we could have a ... in fact at 5:20 on August 17, we said that persons in a low area below elevation, eight foot elevation, need to move to high ground and should make preliminary preparation for that. We had the ability, though, to – with the radio and the City Hall Emergency Operating Center – to push a switch, which turns on the receivers in all radio, television, newspapers in the Houston/Galveston area. This is part of the Emergency Broadcasting Systems so that we could use this means of putting out live information for Baytown. At around 7:00 on Tuesday evening, we told the people in evacu- ; in the Brownwood area that they should be moved to high ground and start preparation immediately and should be moved by noon on Wednesday. As the storm increased in intensity at that time, it did have winds of 80 miles an hour, and was about 175 miles southeast of Galveston. Early Wednesday morning, though, we said that it could go six to eight feet, and we started giving information on the area that would be flooded. Uh ... around 2 p.m., on Wednesday, the National Hurricane Center and National Weather Service told us that the storm was increasing. And so we ... at that time it was up to around 85 miles an hour. In fact at 2:00 it was about, winds about 100 miles an hour, and was about 85 miles southwest of ... southeast of Galveston. And we at that time said the tides could go up to 10 feet during the course of Alicia. And during the evening, it got worse. We were putting out hourly bulletins over the radio stations and television giving information. And we recommended evacuation after 10 feet. Around 11 p.m. on Wednesday, the National Weather Service called us and said that they had increased the strength and it was up to 115 miles an hour. They have a classification of storms with the Category 1 being a minimal hurricane, a Category 5 a cataclysmic hurricane. So with winds of 115 miles an hour, this would put it in the Category of 3, which is winds to 111 to 130 miles an hour. We also had a report, which was given in 1981 by Texas A&M based upon computer models of hurricanes where, and it gives the effect on Baytown area. It gives the effect of tide surge. So with the information from the report, we knew that the tides would increase rapidly. It so happened on Wednesday, the tide reached a maximum of about four, of four feet around shortly after noon on Wednesday, and then was going down to a low tide around 11:30 p.m., Wednesday night. The unfortunate part was that some people that are used to watching the tides, watched the water go down and they said, “Uh-huh, it’s not going to be so bad.” And even though we were putting out warnings that it would come up and would be high tides with dangerous tides, they chose to stay in their houses. At, uh ... we’d gone through the PA system. Gene Shepherd’s Brownwood Civic Association went through Tuesday evening telling them to move out. And around 8 p.m. on Wednesday, we sent a fire truck with a public address system through the Brownwood area telling them
that the have dangerous tides, and not to spend the night in the area. Most people heeded the warning, uh, but some of them did not heed the warning. And according ... the tides did start coming up rapidly right after midnight, and reached a point which would flood the Perimeter Road and Brownwood around 2 a.m. And from then on, there was quite a lot of confusion to those people that were caught there. According to what the reports that we got, why, there were approximately 100 people that were caught in the water, and it was just miraculously that nobody was drowned, and nobody was injured. Some of ‘em waded out, some of ‘em were carried out, some of ‘em swam out. Quite a number were taken out in trucks by the Police Department and Public Works Department. And some of them were even rescued in the Amphibious Vehicle and taken off the tops of some of their roofs, as I understand. So the first winds, though ... it’s difficult to say what the winds were. We have the record of winds from Exxon. And we estimate that starting around 5:00 in the morning, we had gusts up to 100 miles an hour. The ... and from ... hold that just a minute.

From 5 a.m. to around 11 a.m., there were frequent gusts of over 100 miles an hour. Sustained winds were between 80 and 85 miles an hour. Probably. The records are difficult to read. And some of the gusts probably were over 120, and could be as high as up to 130 miles an hour. So it was quite some time there, some five or six hours, that we did have quite strong wind. It was very interesting to note that our tides compared quite favorably with the predicted tide from the Texas A&M study. And they ... and we use that study to show the approximate time and the rapid rise. They were given in term ... the study was given in terms of time of landfall. Alicia made landfall at San Luis Pass around 1:40 a.m. on Thursday morning. The, uh ... the highest ... we didn’t know when that would be because the National Weather Service really can’t predict very accurately when. They have a difficulty of predicting the landfall, but they had more difficulty in predicting time of landfall. That’s more inaccurate than the location of landfall. But we knew that it would probably be in shortly after midnight and early morning that it would make landfall. And so that according to the study, our maximum tide would occur approximately six hours after landfall. With a, a landfall of 1:40, that would make our approximate maximum tides around 7:30, 8:00. And it turns out that that’s almost exactly when our maximum tides occurred. When we made a comparison and were able to look back based upon actual landfall, the prediction was excellent agreement with what was predicted. Better probably would be than we can routine expect for that kind of thing. So the ... there were heroic efforts during that time. Emergency Operating Center here at the City Hall was in operation all day Wednesday. Most of, well, all day Wednesday, all day Thursday, and really from then on until the following Sunday there wasn’t any time that it wasn’t in operation. We were getting reports on needs in the field. The purpose of the Emergency Operating Center is that the service chief operate – during in emergency on a coordinative basis so that they can work under the city manager and with the emergency management coordinator – where red tape can be cut through; emergency decisions can be made. According to the Emergency Management Ordinance, which was adopted about a year ago, the delegate, the authority of the mayor as the court of the director of Emergency Management, appointed by the governor, has been delegated to the city manager and to the emergency management coordinator. Under this we have the authority to make routine, I mean emergency rules and regulations. And so that we could do, make such things as changing direction of the flow on traffic, and change the streets to one way street, and initiate curfew. Even some price control would be reasonable under those conditions. And so the Emergency Operation Center was in operation, and was quite a busy place tryin’; coordinating with the ... and filling in the needs of the services as best we could with the resources. So the purpose of the Emergency Operating Center really is to get report on needs, look at the resources, match the resources with the need so that there’s not
an overlap and we don’t run out of resources in time. It worked generally very well. We see some needs for improvement, but that basically is the story.

MM: How many people did you have working here?

FH: As many as 15. Even 20 at one time during the height of it. But we estimate that we probably, during the week that we were in operation, used about 150 person days assuming eight hour work for a day. And some worked more, some less. And so we used lots of people.

MM: And you worked around the clock for those?

FH: Right around the clock, uh-huh. Best part of a week. Best part of a week. I used almost … quite a number … we had, we lost power, uh, city power, around 2:00 in the morning, and we were on emergency power for about 30 hours. All the power in the City Hall was off. We lost our emergency generator for about an hour Thursday morning, about from 8 to 9 a.m. But other than that we had power. But with the no power in the City Hall, then on Thursday and Friday, city employees worked in the Emergency Operating Center to help us out, and nearly everybody in the City Hall worked here.

[End of tape]

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