

An Interview with

Henry Davis

March 30, 1980

Interviewed by

Ben Peeler

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Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens about the Easter Flood of 1979. The interviews were conducted during the 1979-1980 school year.

PEELER: Okay this is December 3rd, no, not December the 3rd, March 30th, 1980 and the interviewee is Mr. Henry Davis and this is Mr. Ben Peeler.

DAVIS: Now, is this on? Over here?

PEELER: Yes.

DAVIS: Cause I'm looking at this switch on.

PEELER: Okay, just to start off, when was this house built?

DAVIS: Let's see, built in 1962.

PEELER: And were you the first person to live in it?

DAVIS: Yeah.

PEELER: Well, when it was built, were you aware that you were in a flood zone?

DAVIS: No, well I knew that the water, I had come out here in December of '61 and I had because that's when we were told it was the highest that the river had ever been and I came out here in December of '61 about a day or two after the crest to look cause I knew we were going to build on this lot and the water was probably about a hundred yards away from the lot at the time and I was told at that time that it did not even get on this property, in fact, it didn't get much closer than what I saw that day.

PEELER: Okay, well, when this flood occurred, what was the first indication you had that your house might flood, I mean, did you, was there any map or did somebody tell you or did you just see the water coming up?

DAVIS: Well, we heard on Friday the 13th that, that the road was gonna, was expected to get pretty high and so we had an indication that we'd probably have water in the back of our lot because recalling back to 1961, I remembered that, that it had gotten around 38 feet in '61 and we were told that it was gonna get at that time probably around 37 or 38 feet and we heard that it might even get more than 38 so I knew that I might have to move some things out of that storage house. So that's probably the night we moved some things out of that storage house because we felt like it was going to get on our property

PEELER: So you first heard it on the radio?

DAVIS: We either heard it on the radio or some people called and told us about it. Well, a combination probably.

PEELER: Well, you know if you knew when the (inaudible) correctly predicted one crest and then they would go back and change it and the things about the reservoir and everything, it seemed like there really was no way to tell what information was true and what wasn't. Who do you feel was like, who do you feel was responsible for keeping the public informed? Since we have so many different departments working at one time, who do you think was in charge of it? Who do you think should have been in charge of informing us?

DAVIS: Well, I would think that, that you know, the civil defense of the city should have been in charge of informing us, and I think it should have been done a little bit, I think it should have been better communication because not everybody watches TV, not everybody listens to the radio, and in a serious situation like that I think that possibly they might have blown the tornado sirens, something to that effect to put people on the alert.

PEELER: Well, by what means do you keep, how did you keep informed about what was going on? Did you listen to the radio or did you, or did you just hear that water was predicted to crest at so and so and that something was (inaudible)

DAVIS: Well that Friday night it was probably more from just word of mouth, we heard from other people who knew that we were living in a lower area, and we had several phone calls, so that Friday night that was the most of the communications that we got. Of course, Saturday morning when I got up at about 5:30 and looked out the upstairs window, I didn't need anybody to tell me that the water was here 'cause it was already here.

PEELER: Yeah, well, it, it started flooding this house down here at the end of the street, and it just moved up the street didn't it?

DAVIS: Well, that's, that was the lowest on this side of the street, but it was often coming in from the back. Yeah. Now, it was on my property right over here on this end, see that Saturday morning, when I got up and saw the water, then I decided that I really hadn't done a good enough job right in that little storage house and I decided to go out there and do a better job, and so I went out there about 7:00 and stayed until about 9 or 9:30, and I put everything up four feet, which turned out not to be enough, but by that time water was on our property but it, it also was beginning to get into that lower end down there. In fact, it probably was in the Morris's house already by that time.

PEELER: Did you have any contact with any of the local officials? Anybody who knew anything besides the National Guard? Because it really didn't seem like there was ever anybody coming down there to find out what was going on, of any official capacity.

DAVIS: No, I, I didn't have any contact with nobody of official capacity, that night they wrestled us all out at 3:00 in the morning.

PEELER: Well, what did you feel about the reason behind that they gave about, it seemed like there was more rumors about the reservoir. What did you feel about that?

DAVIS: You mean when that bunch came down here and wrestled us out?

PEELER: Yeah. When the National Guard came, did you?

DAVIS: Well, that was the city police that came.

PEELER: Oh it was the police?

DAVIS: Yeah. Well, they, well they didn't tell us anything we didn't already know. I felt like at the time when they were doing all this, that it was one of two things, that it was either the dam was gonna break, but they wouldn't tell us that. Or else that they was really just about 24 hours late in doing what they, but that was the message that they should have given us 24 hours previous.

PEELER: Mmhhmm. Well, if the dam, if it had been the dam do you think they really should have informed the public? Right off, you know, cause it might have, might have had some bad side effects to tell people that that big dam up there is, you know, they're going to have to blow it or whatever, or it's going to collapse.

DAVIS: Well, I think yeah they should have told us if they felt that. I think we ought to be informed anytime that dam going to go.

PEELER: Well, that is true. Well, after like, during the daytime when people were out of school and out of, you know, the businesses were closed, were you bothered very much at all by sight seers? People coming down here and, just to look, or by boaters riding back, there in the woods?

DAVIS: No not really, 'cause the problems that we probably had from, we did have some problems from boater, but that was only on one or two occasions that we had problems from boaters, three if you count the one you and I had. With the police, the most problems I had from sight seers was two groups that came down here that I ran out, because I felt like they didn't have any business down here, that they were from out of the county, and I felt like there might be the possibilities there were some looters looking the situation over and then the other two problems I had was with the National Guard, just driving vehicles through the water.

PEELER: I guess a lot of people didn't realize that the ripples, the vibrations of water

would tend to tear things up pretty bad inside the house.

DAVIS: Well, yeah because a wake from a roller, a wake from a vehicle going through, through the water, can mean the difference between the water getting in somebody's house or not getting in, or the difference in it getting in the TV and not getting in the TV or whatever the case might be.

PEELER: It was like that in your house for a while.

DAVIS: Yeah, it was touch and go, and a good boat wake could have put it in when it might not had gotten in by any other way. Of course, it ended up getting in there anyway, but somebody else (inaudible) right up the street, now he (inaudible) three inches getting into his house, a boat wake could have put it in.

PEELER: Well, do you think talking about the people that were in charge, do you think tha the E.O.C. did a decent job, did what they were supposed to do? Seeing as how they should have been the one's coordinating the weather service reports and the warnings and whatever was supposed to (inaudible).

DAVIS: Well, you know, I don't really know what their, what their function is other than to, you know accumulate this information, and I don't know by what means they have of getting it out to the public, I guess it just takes a, a joint effort between the city and the emergency center, but you know, if, if we hadn't had people tell us on the telephone and that kind of thing, we might've, we might not have known anything until Saturday, until we saw the water.

PEELER: Mhmm, well, they say that a lot of this problem might have been caused by the reservoir.

DAVIS: Mmhmm.

PEELER: The fact that it had so much problems. Do you feel that the people that were working up there were doing the right thing in what they did? Holding, and letting so much of the water go, holding a certain amount, but mainly just flooding a lot of it out.

DAVIS: Well, of course a lot of that's hind sight, I feel like that and I don't have those figures in front of me cause they're up at the office, but I have from the National Weather Service, I have the river stages for the, for the various days of the week preceding the flood and I feel like that the Barnett Reservoir could have lowered, lowered their water level knowing that all this water was coming when the river stages was reading 28, 29, 30, along in there. They could have raised it up to 35 feet and gotten a lot of that water out of there. Which, of course, would have, would have prematurely

maybe flooded some areas that were going to get flooded anyway, but I think that they could have, I think that, I think if they had handled it right where it was very borderline like our house, they might have kept it out of our house if they had handled it earlier.

PEELER: Okay. Well, who do you feel was responsible? I mean, if you're going to pin it down on one person, one group, who do you feel would be the most responsible person for causing this flood? Who would you lay the blame on?

DAVIS: Well, you know, it's, it's hard to lay it on just one particular group of people, but, if I was going to lay the blame on it, I would have to lay it on those people who were responsible for building and filling on the river. You want to cut this off for a second so we can (inaudible).

PEELER: Okay

DAVIS: I was going to continue on that thought of who I thought was responsible.

PEELER: Right

DAVIS: And I'd say those who issued permits allowing drilling and filling on, on, on the Pearl River area, which caused all this water to back up.

PEELER: Mmmhmm. That would be the Army Corps of Engineers wouldn't it?

DAVIS: No, the Corps of Engineers, no, well, them or whoever they are but I'm talking about the areas around Lakeland.

PEELER: Oh yeah.

DAVIS: In that area. Which I hold, between that and the reservoir, I'd say that was a hundred percent of our problem.

PEELER: Mmhhmm. This is kind of off the subject, but did you realize that they are building, they are going to put a condominium down on this new road?

DAVIS: Yeah, we just got the note, well, we've been hearing about that.

PEELER: What are your feelings on that? Since it would relate to the fact that it would be filling in and stuff

DAVIS: Well that's more of the same thing, more fill, plus the fact that this property is not zoned for that.

PEELER: Right.

- DAVIS: And I think it would de-value all of our residence (inaudible).
- PEELER: Well, in the future since you said a hundred percent of our problem is between reservoir and Lakeland, to prevent such floods, what do you think, what steps do you think should be taken now that we already have some of this land filled in anyway, what do you think we should do now to prevent this from happening again, like in the way of levees and...
- DAVIS: Well I think the first thing they ought to do is immediately stop all filling on the Pearl River.
- PEELER: Right.
- DAVIS: Flood plain areas.
- PEELER: Mhhmm.
- DAVIS: Cause there were times when the cubic yard (inaudible) anything you were displacing the cubic yard of water and it has to go somewhere and it's going to back up it's not going out it's going to back up. So, that would be the first thing, the second thing I'd find out who was involved (inaudible) of the environmental law that's down there and I'd make them tear it down I don't care if it's two million dollar office building, I'd make them tear it down.
- PEELER: Mhhmm.
- DAVIS: Number three I think they need to widen that, widen and deepen the channel and do something down there at that bridge, probably widen and deepen the channel and have to build a bigger bridge at Lakeland so that more water can get down through there.
- PEELER: Right.
- DAVIS: Because it's strictly back water that got...
- PEELER: Right.
- DAVIS: Water that couldn't get out at Lakeland, and from there down, that couldn't get out.
- PEELER: Well, how much damage did you receive personally from the flood? I mean, how much was your house damaged? How high did the water go inside of it?
- DAVIS: Well it was only about three inches deep in the house.

PEELER: It's a pretty elevated house though, right?

DAVIS: Yeah, all our damage, really, is from the surface of the floor down because we're on a (inaudible) foundation out on a slab and the sub floor's still not dry. Underneath the house is still not dry, and this is almost a year, so...

PEELER: Did you apply for any of the aid or the release? The aid that they were....

DAVIS: Yeah.

PEELER: Did you apply at the, I guess it was at Lakeland that they had the (inaudible) wasn't it?

DAVIS: Riverside.

PEELER: Riverside, yeah.

DAVIS: The disaster center?

PEELER: Right.

DAVIS: Yeah.

PEELER: Do you feel like they did a good job at that? It seemed like it was a big rush on it, they had a lot of complications, after the flood, do you think that the relief workers...

DAVIS: Well, when I was over there and I guess I didn't go, I didn't go the first day because I felt like that was going to be a mad house and I don't know what day I went but, by the time I had gone I guess that the first big thrust had been handled and, I guess I probably spent about four or five hours over there but I can't say that I would say that considering the circumstances and having to do it on a quick, you know, just throw things together, I think they did a pretty good job over there. Now I (inaudible) over there because after that I can't say how good a job they did.

PEELER: Right. Well, that covers my questions for this time and thank you very much.

DAVIS: Okay, Benji.

END OF RECORDING