

An Interview with

William C. West

March 30, 1980

Interviewed by

William T. Hetrick

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history interviews with local citizens about the Easter Flood of
1979. The interviews were conducted during the 1979-1980
school year.

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HETRICK: My name is William Hetrick, and I am a senior at Murrah High School, in Jackson, Mississippi. This tape is about the April 1979 flood in Jackson and it's part of an oral history project in Mrs. Diane Canterbury's Honors American History class at Murrah High School. Today is March 29, 1980, and I am interviewing William C. West, head checker at Kroger Supermarket on Interstate 55 North in Jackson. Mr. West, how were you involved in the April 1979 flood?

WEST: As an employee of Kroger, I and all other employees have the responsibility of trying to save the store and prevent as much damage as possible.

HETRICK: How did the flood affect your store?

WEST: Well, on Saturday night, the 14th of April, after closing at 12 o'clock, the parking lot of the store and the loading dock in the back started to fill up with water from a nearby creek and we knew then that the water was going to enter the store. So then and there, we started making preparations to prevent as much damage as possible. We closed down the store and we took all of the money out. We moved all of the storage records up to a higher level, and we brought in more people from other stores that already closed, that weren't affected by the flood. And we brought management personnel down from Memphis, and anywhere we could find to get stock up and to start sandbagging the outside of the store to prevent the water from entering. A lot of this was effective, but still a lot of water did get into the store.

HETRICK: Exactly how much water came into the store?

WEST: Well, in the beginning of Saturday night, the water was six inches inside the store, and then our sandbagging efforts and through the efforts of several high velocity pumps we got most of the water out. But then when the water continued to rise, there was eventually almost a foot of water inside the store.

HETRICK: In terms of price of merchandise, how much did your store lose?

WEST: Well, the final audit, which was determined by the inventory after the flood damage was completed, was almost \$17,000 in stock.

HETRICK: Now, how about damage to the building itself?

WEST: Well, the damage to the building was negligible in terms of there was no structural damage to it. There were a lot of you know, cracks where pumps had to have been moved in, but otherwise, the store was not structurally damaged.

- HETRICK: Did you have damage to any of the fixtures in the store?
- WEST: Well, all the electrical equipment on the floor such as plugs and wiring and all, had to be replaced because of water damage and shorts. Cash registers and other valuable equipment such as that were undamaged due to their high level, but all the shelves on the bottom level had to be replaced.
- HETRICK: While we're discussing money, how long was the store itself closed and how much money was lost due to the closing of the store and the flood?
- WEST: Well, the store was closed for six business days plus the two Sundays during the flood. And in terms of business, we lost approximately \$114,000. That's by taking the week before the flood and the week after and just averaging out how much business was lost.
- HETRICK: You mentioned the fact that you brought in extra people to help with preparations for keeping the water out of the store, did you bring in personnel to help with the cleanup, and if so, how much did that cost your store?
- WEST: Yes, we brought in management personnel from our central division in Memphis, and they were on a salary, they would have been taken anyway. But in terms of cleanup, we hired several people from around the area, friends of employees and all, and in terms of their pay, that cost the Kroger Corporation about \$10,000.
- HETRICK: After Kroger reopened, what was the attitude of your customers? Were they reluctant to come in, knowing that the store had been flooded and the possibility that some of the food could have been damaged in some way?
- WEST: Well, a lot of our customers were flooded out themselves, so they realized that everything had been cleaned up and all the damaged merchandise had been removed from the shelves. And I don't think that that affected them very much at all. Although we did have a (inaudible) of business loss immediately after the reopening of the store because a lot of people knowing the store was flooded, and not knowing if it would reopen.
- HETRICK: All told, what exactly financially did the flood do to your store?
- WEST: Well, in terms of monetary loss, with the damage to the store, the stock, and the business that was lost, Kroger lost about \$150,000 on the flood itself.
- HETRICK: Did any officials from the city of Jackson or the Army Corps of Engineers or the Pearl River Basin Authority inform you of the possibility of your store being flooded?

WEST: No one from the city or county, as far as I know, had warned us. We knew the water was rising, but we didn't know it would affect our store the way it did. The only way we that knew was we saw the water coming ourselves and we took action by ourselves. Only after, the day after the water started entering our store, were we informed of the possible crest level of the water, and therefore the total effect on us.

HETRICK: After the flood was over and the damage had been done, there were a lot of people pointing their fingers at the city and the Army Corps of Engineers and saying you know, you should have let us know. Your warnings were not adequate enough. How do you feel about this?

WEST: Well, I feel that the warning itself could have been a little better, but I feel the city did the best job they could, with the little information it had from the National Weather Service report regarding the total height in the river but, in my opinion, working with the information they had, they did a reasonably fair job.

HETRICK: It's been within one week of a year since the flood of '79, and today, the Pearl River stands at 34.4 feet. The flood stage for the Pearl is 28 feet. Is there any concern at the Kroger that last year's situation will reoccur, and if so, what precautions are being taken or will be taken?

WEST: Well, right now, there really is no concern about the stage of the Pearl River right now, because last year, the Pearl River was at 41 feet before it even entered the parking lot, so, we will not start to panic until the river gets about six feet higher, and in that case, we'll take the same precautions we did last year, plus, anything additional we've learned since the flood into account and take appropriate action.

HETRICK: With appropriate action, do you believe you can keep water out of the store?

WEST: Well, there's really no way to tell with that kind of situation. We'll do everything possible to prevent it, but there is no absolute positive to prevent damage in that situation.

HETRICK: Thank you, Mr. West. The opinions that Mr. West has stated are strictly his own and do not reflect the opinions of the Kroger Company.

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