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Address: *Box Chappell*  
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Description of gift: *1052 Big Thompson Rd*  
*Montrose Montie*

*oral history interview*

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*and Charles*  
Mary Chappell  
Aug. 23, 1976

Montrose Inn  
Big Thompson Canyon  
Loveland, Colorado  
Interviewer: David McComb

M: The recorder is now going.

C: And my name is Mary Chappell, I live at Montrose Inn in the Big Thompson Canyon, we're approximately eleven miles from Loveland. And I live here with Charles Chappell, and we have had the Montrose Motel for twenty-two seasons now.

M: Twenty-two seasons.

C: And we are one of the oldest residents in this Montrose subdivision, this big mountain behind you is Montrose. And the evening of the flood, our alarm clocks went off at 9:32, and they're still at that date, twenty-four days later. We've had no electricity for that long.

M: So that's when your electricity was stopped.

C: 9:32. We had no warning at all, of anything going on. Other than a good deal of activity in the area. We saw people moving their cars from across the road, and they began moving up on us, and we're on higher ground. They went up to our back lot, way up high, against the mountainside, so we knew this man had a CB, so he had had some kind of warning that something was going on. Probably 20, 25 minutes later, there was cruiser, and he parked right in front of us by our mailbox, and his light was flashing. Other than that, we heard nothing because by this time we could hear the water.

M: There's a lot of noise in the river.

C: These rocks were bouncing off of each other like ping-pong, and the roar was just incredible. There have been four distinct noises in this thing: the water sounds, then the helicopters the next day, which was a welcome sound, and then in the night, absolute black silence. You would never believe it could be as quiet as it was. And a few days later the construction workers, the noise of these huge construction men. So there have been four

distinct noises in this four weeks now. To me, they are very penetrating, because I am a musician.

M: Oh. So you're aware of noises?

C: Yes, of noises. And the flood rose very, very slowly. In fact, I was standing on the inside curve of Highway 34 looking west, and the water came up just about as you would raise your hand, and it hit the doorknob on the house there. And down here you can sit on the fence behind that pickup, so it actually rose about five feet. Now there are rumors that there was a wall of water ten or fifteen feet high. If there was, we did not see it.

M: Okay.

C: What was going on, back over on the actual river, we can't tell. Because there are some huge trees that have been in here, I know, at least a hundred years, because we counted rings on a River Court tree here one time, and it was seventy-two years old, and it's been cut some time, so these are older.

What was going on back in there we couldn't see, it was terribly dark. The only way of illuminating anything on the water touched the edge of our heads here, on the Montrose east side. All you could see was when you could run your cars down that way, and then you could see: what you couldn't see what was there.

This was the first shock. What you had looked at for 22 years, it wasn't there. And your mind would stop and almost do a retake. You expected to see, well, six houses on the north of me, there was nothing. Just this sound of water. We did walk on down this old block, stood on the bridge and look at Canyon Inn. There was white Cadillac parked west, and this was a ghostly thing, this car just rose up and backed itself politely around those two houses, came out and around and parked itself right up here on the Highway 34 heading out.

M: Oh, my goodness.

C: About a minute later, we looked at the boat over there. It did the very same thing. It came right on around and parked right in the middle of the yellow line of Highway 34. These were incredible things. Mysterious things.

M: Yes.

C: These were just happening. And it all happened, it seemed, it must have been going on for a couple of hours. But we couldn't see, yet we were trying to see, we would keep hearing all these sounds. And there weren't very many people in here then. I'd say maybe a dozen of us, that were watching all this happen. Then we realized it was running into this house below us.

M: Yes.

C: And this is on the south side of Highway 34, and it was well up into that house. Now this is an old log house that's been in there. It was mysterious, it was almost a super thing. One is never aware of the intense power of nature until you see the incredible....the sky in the evening was just black. Now I grew up in a ranch in New Mexico, and we're aware of cloud conditions, and the western sky was just terribly, terribly dark that day, and then it just moved in. It was dark, so dark.

M: How did this A-frame house get down on that bridge?

C: The A-frame that's sitting on the middle of the bridge below us was on the north side of Montrose, and it moved down the bridge, and it has knocked down part of the bridge and is just parked there. And the odd thing about this is there's a sign just a few feet from it that says, "No parking at any time." Also, this house we're working on, this was, belonged to Norm Eyl, and he was from Denver, he had a laboratory there, I think he worked for, what was it, allergies, to prevent, a good thing he did. His house was split in half. One half was on the right side of Montrose 34, and one on the left side. [Siren] And we are just cleaning this out. That's Norman Eyl,

president of that group. [Shows picture.]

M: Right

C: But there's absolutely nothing left. I'd say this man in the past five years has spent close to two hundred thousand dollars. He had purchased property, three properties, and there is nothing, it's just complete devastation.

M: Yes. And no flood insurance, probably.

C: I don't know.

M: Most people didn't.

C: No, no. This is a pretty astute man. I read in the newspapers that about 80% of the people in the Big Thompson Canyon did not have any flood insurance.

M: That's what I've heard, too. Yes.

C: Now the River Court, I look at, which is directly south of me, has been known to people, I know, for at least twenty-five years people have been coming back here, saying, "Well, we used to dance at River Court." There is nothing left of River Court. The mud is above the windows in the old original dance hall.

M: Oh, my.

C: And the pool is just full of mud and water.

M: Yes. Did your court get any damage?

C: It came to the edge of our hedge and within fifty feet of the well, But of course, we can't do anything because we have no electricity, and we all drive a mile up the road to Park Terrace to get water.

M: So you still haven't got your water going?

C: Yes, to get fresh water we go there, and, of course, we boil everything.

M: Right.

C: And, I think one of the most remarkable things in this whole mess is the loyalty of the children. I'd say within two days we saw at least ten

youngsters that walked over Montrose--now this is a hard three-mile walk-- and our daughter, Claire Chappell, was one of them. We had been on the telephone to her. She is in the Air Force at Washington State, and I said, "We'd better hang up, there's a storm coming."

Well, she walked across that mountain no less than six times, and she brought clothing, mail, she took out insurance papers at Mrs. Huffsmith, she bought ice, newspapers, and the helicopter boys became acquainted with her. They flew her in a dozen times. She was kind of an angel of mercy. And people love Claire Chappel now. [Laughter.] And what she did was help us through the shock, the morale was lifted, because here was this young woman who had left her job and had come home to see what had happened. And we saw a lot of neighbor youngsters walk in over the mountains, and they all had backpacks on, and they would have ice and things that we wanted desperately on a hot August.

M: I'll bet, I'll bet. Well, the next day, Sunday, you must have come out and looked around, there's all this damage.

C: Honey (to Mr. Chappell), what did you see this next day, on Sunday?

CC: Huh?

C: Tell, come, this is being recorded. What did you see on Sunday?

CC: That's when I had my picture taken, supposedly watching my motel. Oh, Sunday, oh, I don't remember. Monday it rained. Sunday, the sun shone.

M: Well, did the Sheriff's Department come in then pretty quick?

C: No, we became alarmed about Monday when we saw some people going in a house that they knew they had no business going into. And I called the Sheriff.

CC: Monday it wasn't very well-organized yet, but the helicopters came in Saturday and Sunday, and they were going over, and they established a landing pad up half a mile up at Park Terrace, and on the spur of the

moment, I don't remember very much, what the heck happened. Everybody kind of dazed, and they just walked around or mostly concerned about getting the sick ones out and medicine in to people who weren't well, and then on Monday, was the first part of it, that helicopter fell down, and so it didn't kill anybody, I guess it was quite a little deal, though.

M: Right. Well, have you had any trouble with looters or anything like that?

C: Well, some of it has been going on.

M: You think so?

C: There's been some hoarding going on. There's been some thieving going on, just plain out and out. One man stole everybody's gas thing before anybody was aware of it, because he wanted to get out of here.

CC: He just appropriated them, it was considered perfectly all right, because of the circumstances.

C: I know, but we had a dozen cars parked from all kinds of people; they were up because we are high.

CC: Oh, the most interesting thing, kids started coming in wearing guns and claiming to be the law, that was kind of a, kind of a ...the first few days

C Cause they thought they were shooting rattlesnakes, and then we weren't sure. There's never been any rattlesnakes here.

CC: And then they got organized, the county got organized, and they had to have passes and of course, everybody then was mad at the sheriff and his department because they couldn't get in, I suppose she told you about our daughter trying to get in.

M: Coming over the mountain.

C: No, my daughter came from Alamosa after hearing what's on the radio, she was

taking her master's degree in Alamosa on special education, and she was on the helicopter with Dick Huffsmith.

CC: Oh.

C: And the sheriff got high and mighty and said, "Well, you can't go in." Well, Dick was very perturbed because he had lost his oldest son.

M: Right.

C: And Betty Ann [another Chappell daughter] had been down in Loveland all day long, Betty Ann Johnson, she teaches in LaVeta with her husband, Bob Johnson, and they were very perturbed because here she was supposed to be writing final exams, and she couldn't....

CC: Well, that's just an example, you know, they wouldn't let them in.

C: Well, this, naturally, people that lived here were not going to leave. This was all we had, we've worked for it for years, and we had to be here to protect it, that's what we thought. At night my husband built a big bonfire and people would come and sit, I guess the people are more friendly than they've ever been in all the years they were here in August, because this is the most competitive month, and suddenly, there's nothing to compete.

CC: We had some bad feelings, not so much over looting, because the fellows, the people, that seem to be hollering the most about looting were, I think the ones that were doing it. [Someone] quietly walking across a piece of property with a sharp eye and something land [in the eye's view], and [they] just walk back to their home base. I haven't heard of anybody looting there points, because everything was damaged. These people were both killed and we're doing... I suppose, to everybody else this is looting, but with the written permission of the relatives.

C: Of the family.

M: Yes.

C: And....

CC: Our basic natures begin to show up right away. The Red Cross was flying supplies in, and one gentleman, after he got everything he wanted, he told them to keep their supplies, the soldier, the pilot on the helicopter to keep the supplies, they didn't need any more of them. And that went on several times. Quite frequently.

Then one day, this same man, had the helicopter flying in cold pop the Army or the Air Corps, cold pop, fresh apples, and sandwiches in the middle of the afternoon, and I, personally, took them off the helicopter and helped load them in another man's truck and brought them right up to here to where he got them. And then he turned around, four Bell Telephone executive or engineers came in and started checking on this cable. This man began to run the Army down. We had a few words over that.

And then there's some young people, two or three families live back there, that aren't too, aren't socially accepted. I just out and out call them hippies. And we feel there was a definite organization to keep them from getting Red Cross supplies, to freeze them out, and make them go out. Then the other hard feeling was over these generators. The Red Cross and the Army, or the Air Corps, was flying in generators, and some were getting them, and some were not. And some people, like people at Monterey, had been tending to their own business, and this Red Cross stuff was shut off, and they were unhappy over that.

C: I had a friend who bought a horse and a jenny, this was a kind of mule, and they backpacked in food, and that's the only food we had at Montrose. That was brought in by the horses, over the back of the Clymers' ranch.

CC: Oh, no, we had some food from Park Terrace.

C: Very little.

CC: This was just a generous overture on the part of these people that came in the first few days.

C: With the horses.

CC: With their horses, and they went around to everybody and to see what people needed.

C: And they brought newspapers.

CC: And they brought it back. What was that man's name? Give him credit here.

C: Knudson.

CC: Knudson. Mr. [William] Knudson was the ringleader of it.

C: In return, I cooked their supper for them.

CC: And we were told, wife was told a day or two ago, somebody told the sheriff nobody needed those supplies he was bringing in, and he was stopped from bringing them in. But it was a noble, a noble....

C: The generosity of people has been overwhelming. And the kindness of people, And many people, I'm sure, have thought more about their Maker than they had in a long time. And the true makings of the individual is definitely brought strongly into the limelight, now you have the greedy person who thinks of just of himself and his business and how fast he can get out, And you think of the other people who have worked untiring hours to try to fix up the mess and try to go on living. So real people really come to life.

CC: Those little things surmounted them, then, then, there a little later, I think, there were some, many people in the know, I didn't know of, that others that these automobiles and all of this equipment were going to be paid for either by the government or the insurance company. I didn't see it personally, and I don't think it happened out here, but up at the Cove I assume it did, things were systematically stripped and later, well, they were just....

M: Oh, my....

C: Now this is three weeks later that the cars are beginning to be hauled out of here, in large quantities. It's a salvage,

M: Yes.

CC: All in all, everybody bore up very well under it, though. There's an old man down here by the name of Shelton from Arizona, and he can give you some graphic description of the Mares family that lost their life just below the River Court, they lived. They were trying to get in their car instead of, they could have walked up the 200 feet or 150 feet up the side of the mountain on their own property there, and they tried to get their car out, I suppose, and some belongings, and he said he heard an awful scream. And if you talk to him, he can....

C: Well, they did repark the family car. I think they must have all been in their Scout. This is true of Norm Eyl, some people thought they saw him trying to climb on top of the house.

CC: I got a new version about Norm Eyl, course it was dark and you couldn't see and people may have been imagining things. But one young man claimed he saw him on the roof, and when it hit this tree, or when it bounced, or something, hit the house, and it broke up, they were knocked off of the roof, and he thought he heard them scream. But there were all kinds of stories.

C: But the body was a mile and quarter downstream.

CC: All kinds of stories about them.

M: But you folks decided to stay here rather than, say go to Loveland or someplace. Why did you stay here?

C: To protect our property.

CC: Oh, no, We're dumb, ignorant, we didn't keep contact with people, we didn't know that we could get food and housing down there, and we just stayed here.

C: Well, we're not conniving enough.

CC: Not only that, we had people, we had four or five cars there, and I thought, well, people asked if they could leave them, tourists, they spent the night with us, and I kind of felt obligated to them, and not only that, they had to empty up their food baskets. Are you getting that thing full? Empty up their food baskets, I told them not to leave anything in their cars that would spoil, you know, and deteriorate the car, so we had all kinds, for the first four, three or four days, we had,...

M: You were okay.

CC: Yes.

C: That the meanest thing of the flood. On Monday morning, they said, "You've got ten minutes to get out," and here we'd been high and dry and had lived through the first thing, I didn't know what to put in; I didn't know what to move. I have four Bibles, and I didn't know which one to grab. This was a horrible feeling, knowing that we thought we were saving them; that's what frightened the people so.

CC: Everybody was jumpy, and the second day, there was a report of another flood, and I guess the heavy rain went over the Poudre.

C: Well, they said the dam had gone.

M: This in on Monday.

CC: Yes.

C: Yes. And that just scared the people to death. [Siren]

CC: Now I think that that would be about Saturday. No, it happened Saturday night, didn't it? So it would be Sunday, Yes, that's one of the things on Sunday. Then things were kinda quiet on Monday, and Tuesday, it rained. Those were the rainy days. I did a lot of walking around, walked a way up

there and saw the damage. Debris cleaning equipment siren.

M: Well, you folks are gonna stay here, I guess.

CC: Rebuild.

M: You think the Montrose will come back?

CC: Yes, yes, we'll stay here. We've been building and working on it.

C: We've been driving across south of us, across the mountain, across a couple of ranches, that are over there.

CC: Well, I've got to go to work. Could you shut that thing off?

C: I want to express my generosity and my appreciation to Bell Telephone. They flew one of our children out on Monday who wasn't feeling well, and the head man in Denver came, and I met the two gentlemen. And one said he was the engineer that was planning this for us, and that we would have telephone system shortly, and this was the greatest news that we'd had,

M: Well, that's good.

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