I hereby give to the State Historical Society of Colorado, for its use and benefit, without restrictions as to use or disposition (except as noted above), and including all literary and property rights, the property described above.

Date 8-21-76

Signature

RECEIPT

Accepted for the Society by:

Date

Signature

Restrictions noted
M: This is an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Kilbourn... K-I-L-B-O-R-N-E.

MRS.K: Without the "e."

M: Without the "e." I am in their home in Glen Haven. The date is August 21, 1976, and my name is David McComb. Now that microphone is pretty sensitive, and it will pick you up, and you won't have to worry about it. Let me ask you first of all when you first noticed the river down here beginning to rise. When was that?

MRS.K: We were aware that it was raining very hard. We got home from a cocktail party about 7:30 in the evening. I sat in the car for a little bit and my husband dashed in. Because I thought, "Well, it's just a shower and it's going to go over, you know, any minute." It never did stop until 11:00.

But, when did we notice...? The lightning was coming, was just flashing on and off, like a flashlight would, you know, if you had your finger on it. Your fingers and eyes never did really adjust to light so that you could look out.

Finally, we did come out on the deck and noticed that we had, like Mississippi River on both sides of us. On the right over here from this deck is West Creek and on the other side is the North Fork of the Big Thompson.

M: Right. And they were rising?

MRS.K: They had risen.

M: They had risen! How high up were they?

MR.K: When we first checked how high the stream was, I walked down, probably oh, twenty feet lower, down to our old "hut," we call it, our old trapper's cabin. And the stream was up and coming against one corner of it. So I came back and told my wife, Roberta, "Well, if the stream doesn't get any higher, the old cabin -- the trapper's cabin, is all right." So I walked on around to our guest home which is one of the old, original cabins, and I
saw that the water was up to the fence on the back of it. So everything's still all right if it doesn't get any higher. Then, maybe twenty minutes later, we came out, as soon as I came back. You take it from there.

MRS.K: By that time the electricity had gone off because our clock stopped at 9:15 and I think you went out after the electricity went off. We had ... .

MR.K: Yes, it was off.

MRS.K: ... a large flashlight and used that to kind of spot where the water had come.

M: Yes, was the water pretty turbulent by that time?

MRS.K: Oh, yes, quite.

M: Carrying debris with it?

MRS.K: Well, one thing -- later, later on, maybe the twenty minutes after that he spoke of because it rose very quickly, really. We went down that time just about halfway of what his first trip had been, and as we were standing out there, kind of between those trees, a station wagon bobbed down the river. That gave us pause. And then right behind them were two refrigerators. By that time we realized that we really had a terrific flood.

M: Lot of noise?

MRS.K: Yes, the bumping and all of these things going downstream, you see, would be quite noisy on top of the noise of the river itself. You can see how it is today, or can you? Did you notice it particularly?

M: It all seems to be pretty well down, now, but ... .

MRS.K: But that noise you hear down here, you see, going through those, the debris down there that really hasn't been gotten out yet, is the noise you hear.

MR.K: One other thing a historian might not be interested in but we thought that in the earlier part of the storm, during this 20 minute period. We said, "Well, we are being well protected. We said, "We have flashing redlight
police lights down here." And when they . . . . There was no problem. They're down there watching things, so we'll know if there's any real problems. Then, just a few minutes later, why they moved it away.

MRS. K: Downstream.

MR. K: Yes. I wondered why they're moving. Then pretty soon the flashing lights, they disappeared. Found out later that the storm had moved the car, and when they moved it, it turned on the flashing lights. And it was the flashing light of this car that . . . the storm would move it, and then finally it would disappear.

MRS. K: It went downstream so fast . . . .

M: Well, then you just stayed up here the whole night then.

MRS. K: Oh, yes. Didn't sleep very much, but we were here.

M: And the next morning what did you see?

MRS. K: A terrific amount of water with lots and lots of debris already.

(BREAK IN TAPE.)

M: And was the river still up pretty high?

MRS. K: Oh, yes, it stayed up for almost a week. Didn't recede much. We have these gauges here, you know, and we knew how far up it had come because it brings a certain amount of debris with it. We were astounded yesterday when we were trying to clear, as I said, a little bit of these . . . well, quite a lot of this pile of debris, great huge pieces of wood and tree limbs and everything else.

At one place down there in sort of the point of our land, I had to reach up like this, to reach the highest part of that that had been impacted into that tree, well, trees, bushes -- what are those, darling? Small trees, I guess.

M: Must be about six-feet-high, then?
MRS.K: I would guess so in that one particular place, but that's where the two rivers really came together. See they join down here and go on down into the North Fork.

M: Was this bridge out also?

MRS.K: Oh, I'm sure it was. We didn't go out there. We didn't venture out much that night.

M: Right. The next morning did you go into town?

MRS.K: Oh, no, there was no way of getting out. We were surrounded by water. Even down in the road out here in front that you came by, was a running river. The bridge was gone, both sides of us. Our little bridge over here was out, is still out.

M: So you just had to stay here. And your electricity was gone. No telephone. No water.

MRS.K: No water. We have not used our water for drinking at all.

MR.K: Still haven't used it.

MRS.K: No, even though it's been treated twice.

M: Is it contaminated then?

MRS.K: It's unsafe. We've had it tested twice.

M: So that's why you're having to bring the water up in the tank truck down there.

MRS.K: Right. Well, no . . . I guess you brought some up today. But we've been using bottles, artesian drinking water.

M: Well, what happened when the rescue people came in then?

MRS.K: You mean the helicopters. Well, lots and lots of people were gathered down there to be taken out. A constant stream of people, in other words. They followed each other in, so I don't know whether they ever used the Big Chinooks in here because I think those helicopters . . . I mean the blades on both sides, on both ends, aren't they? But they were very large, and
they were Naval. They're ours, aren't they? (Laughs.)

M: (Laughs.) But you people chose to stay here rather than to go out?

MRS.K: Well, until that night.

M: Then what happened.

MRS.K: It'd really been rather a pretty Sunday, hadn't it? Overhead, definitely not underfoot, but overhead.

MR.K: This story she's going to tell is really my fault because I let her use my little portable battery radio.

M: Oh, I see. Okay.

MRS.K: We did. Along in the afternoon, we began listening to what was happening. And when they began talking about all the bodies they were finding down in the Big Thompson Canyon, we became very concerned about our granddaughter and two friends who had come over Saturday morning from Kansas. Their suitcases were still all over the bedroom in there.

So, it was after dark when I said, "I'm not going to sleep tonight; you won't either, why don't we walk out of here?" It was the only way of getting out by that time. So, after dark, on that Sunday night, August 1, we started walking up Devil's Gulch. And three hours later, we got to the top. The last million and a half feet, I just shuffled. (Laughs.)

It was really a bad experience. It was sprinkling. Most of the gulch was a riverbed. Lots of mud and debris on it. One flashlight because we carried ... we went out as lightly as we could. Nelson had his CB which didn't reach over the top, unfortunately. There was no one up there when we got there, so we went up to a friend of ours. And she took us on into our son's.

M: This is in Estes Park?

MRS.K: Yes. Our son, David, and Joy, his wife, have just moved to Estes Park.
They still have boxes all over the place. They took us in that night, after dousing us in hot baths. It really was just great to have David and Joy up there with their... our two granddaughters.

M: Now, did you feel it would be unsafe to stay here?

MRS.K: No, that isn't the reason we went out. The reason we went out was because we hadn't heard from our granddaughter. And, fortunately, fifteen minutes before we arrived, around 11:30, wasn't it, that night? David had heard that she was... they couldn't get us, of course. There was no way to communicate with us. They had heard that she was all right. She was at the Loveland disaster area.

M: Where was she at the time? When the flood hit?

MRS.K: Oh, she was coming up and had almost reached Drake. And decided that it looked too unsettled. And she's been coming since she was a year old. She knows the mountains very well, fortunately. So she turned around and started back towards Loveland, decided... you have something?

MR.K: No.

MRS.K: Oh, I thought you raised a finger. (Laughter.)

MR.K: Just a fly going by.

MRS.K: She had decided then that they'd better stop and get out of the car. About where the Big Thompson Community Building is, they scrambled up that big mountain back of that and got under a rock. It was raining; they were just soaked. Of course, there were about a million other people, too, I guess. I exaggerate, you understand.

They spent quite a few hours there until about 1:30 in the morning. And it let up a bit. The rain was coming down from the mountain then. Fortunately, they could get into the Community Building that night. About eighty or ninety people in it. They must have been just packed in. So they
had a warm place to stay that night, and they were helicoptered out. But that's the reason we walked out that night.

MR.K: The kids were shook, so, really.

MRS.K: Oh, yes, they really had a . . . well, just the idea of escaping was something. Of course, her car was pushed on around, and it's still down there in the gully someplace. We don't know exactly where, although David has seen it, hasn't he? But they would see these cars bobbing down the river, lights on, people screaming in the cars, going down the river.

And one young man who made it across the road to the Community Building . . . I mean they were with them up on the mountain, but in the Community Building later with them had started across with five of them. He looked around when he was part way across, and the others had been swept away.

But this is the kind of thing that they saw, you see. Girls who are 18, 17, and 18. It's a very traumatic experience. They were very sober young ladies when they got back. Tired.

MR.K: I understand there were some cars that wouldn't stop, a few of them, that were still driving in the first part of it. They were driving right on into the worst of it. Of course, no chance for them to get out.

MRS.K: Well, a little bit of knowledge, I think, of the area, fortunately stood them in good stead. I said, "Well, Sharon, there must be something great planned for you." You know, she didn't lose her life.

M: But you knew by 11:00 that night that they were okay? Is that right?

MRS.K: 11:30.

M: 11:30. That would be Sunday evening. That must have been a great relief to you.

MRS.K: Oh, yes. We slept that night.

MR.K: To me, the worst part was the start. This bridge, of course was completely
washed out. And on this side was a river about as wide as from here over there, rushing water.

M: About fifteen feet?

MR.K: More. You can tell by looking there, and then on the other side there was a little less, [the river] that cut over to the bridge which -- the top of the bridge was dry then. Two by 6's, about this wide each of them. Flimsy.

MRS.K: And you walked across.

MR.K: I followed my wife across that. Those two little boards to get over to the bridge. Then when you got on the bridge, to get from there to dry land, there was a stump of a big tree on there that fell over, and you had to get up on the trunk of the tree on the hands and feet and crawl another about eight feet on that trunk to get to shore. That's to start the trip.

M: Whew! That's a heck of a way to start.

MRS.K: Well, we were determined to go.

MR.K: That shows what had happened up here.

MRS.K: Some of the gulch that night was not solid like it is now, of course. Just that day they had filled in a place that was about 200 by 20 feet deep. When it was still raining of course, you sank in every step about four inches, you know. The only way you can make it on a night like that is [to] put one foot in front of another.

MR.K: I went out of the gulch towards Estes before any machinery had been brought in, right away.

One interesting part of the gully where the water was not from West Creek or North Fork either one. It would come off of the mountains. A large area had washed out the road. But if you get up on the road the black pavement would come to a point. You get up on there you thought maybe you was up on the prow of a ship. So you'd look down, here's fifteen feet on
the right, fifteen feet in front of you, just along, narrow point out there. Then there would be 200 feet completely gone. And to get along there, there was no way to stay in the bottom; you had to go on the edge of the mountain to get by.

MRS.K: That was Sunday afternoon when you were out there.

MR.K: Yes.

MRS.K: But by the time we got up there, after dark, they had . . . .

MR.K: I think they went in with the big bulldozers on the top of this blacktop and just shoved that point off. They were mucking everything down just to get tractors.

M: When did you come back to Glen Haven, then?

MRS.K: Tuesday morning.

M: Tuesday morning. How did you get back in? Did you have to walk back?

MRS.K: We thumbed a ride, as I recall. No, David brought us in, because he had his jeep, and he was then deputized. You know, they had a lot of special deputies who are helping. David has not yet decided what he's going to do out here. So he is free, and isn't that the way we got back? He had a pass so that he could come down.

MR.K: He at least brought us to the top of the gulch.

MRS.K: Right, and then you did kind of thumb a ride.

MR.K: There was one time in there when we had three rides to get from the top to the bottom. Go a little ways with one, then you'd get out, and there'd be somebody else, and you'd go a ways with that, and then we'd get out. There were places that they couldn't get by.

M: Did you have electricity for you when you got back?

MRS.K: That was the remarkable part. I think that the people in charge of all of these, what do you call them?
M: Power?

MRS. K: Power and the telephone. The power was on, wasn't it Tuesday evening? Now, that's very quick after. We had it. They're still getting it to the people down below us. But I thought it was great.

The telephone worked off and on after Wednesday night. But I really think that's great.

M: Did you have any, oh, apprehension about people breaking into your house or something while you weren't here?

MRS. K: Looters came to mind.

M: Yes. Did that bother you a little bit?

MRS. K: Yes.

M: That's one of the reasons you came back, I assume.

MR. K: Well, I thought we came back just because we wanted to be home.

M: That could be, too.

MRS. K: Yes. I think that's really the reason we came. But I think all our people were a little bit apprehensive up here.

M: Yes. About the possibility of looting.

MRS. K: Yes. Although they, the Sheriff's Office had been just great about having that checkpoint up there. That has kept a lot of people out, I'm sure, who would come down just to . . . for curiosity.

M: Yes. And so that's been of help to you, then, you think, that checkpoint?

MRS. K: Oh, yes.

M: Otherwise you'd have lots of sightseers, curiosity people . . . .

MRS. K: The sightseers don't bother us, but they do bother the people who are trying to restore the roads and the power.

M: Right, right. Yes, they would interfere with that kind of work.

MR. K: When we came back, we weren't worried too much about water, because we said,
well, we got 50 gallons in the hot water tank. If we get thirsty we can
go down and drain that.

M: You didn't bring any water back in?

MRS.K: Oh, yes, we did.

MR.K: We brought a couple of gallons with us.

MRS.K: You bring lots of things back in. Carrying it from place to place.

M: As you are now, three weeks later, is your greatest problem the lack of
water?

MRS.K: Yes, I think so. Although that isn't a constant thing in our minds. Really
the devastation is great. It's just terrific. We do have a jeep, and we
went down after the men were through, more or less, with working last night.
Took some friends who hadn't had the opportunity who live up here also.
And the channels have been changed. Houses that should be there aren't.

MR.K: I can't help but think that it's a storm of once in a thousand years. Now,
I'm not a geologist, but what I base it on is where our good soil is in the
lower places and the different places. And the depth of it. And then, under-
neath that is all these boulders.

Well, the only way they got there was being brought in by water. And
then this good soil just casually accumulated so we got nice, level places
for picnics and everything. Now that's gone. The top, good part is gone.
It has taken almost centuries to build that black, good dirt in there and
everything. There's been silt from other storms way back when, and now it's
all gone. So how long is it going to be till you build back up to the same
place again? It's going to be a long time.

M: Sure will.

MRS.K: For instance, the people who were down . . . now I'm sure you don't know
them since you're a stranger here . . . they had a place right on the river,
up the gulch just a bit. And had a beautiful yard, lovely flowers and trees, and Sunday morning when I walked up that far, having crawled across the tree and so on, there she was trying to resurrect something.

Their house was just hanging there. It was one of them that's been taken out. There's a big pile of debris now, when I was there. I think most of their house is gone. And she said, "The worst part of this is, what do you come back and build on? The soil's all gone."

M: Right. And, of course, no flood insurance.

MRS.K: That's right. I don't know of anybody in here who has flood insurance.

M: So that's going to hurt a lot of people. Sure will. Well, are you ... is Glen Haven going to rebuild, you think:

MR.K: Oh, sure. Actually, no problem about that.

MRS.K: Of course.

MR.K: Problem isn't the right word. No doubt in my mind.

M: So it'll come back all right, you think, eventually.

MR.K: Two or three hundred homes, and then you take the percent of them that are washed out, and they couldn't be repaired.

MRS.K: People come back and build. You know, that's the history of the nation. They come back and probably, hopefully will build right where they were destroyed.

M: Yes. People tend to do that. Well, does that pretty well cover your story? Is there anything else that comes to mind that happened?

MR.K: Nothing in particular, not right now.

M: Okay. Let me thank you, then, for your time.

MRS.K: You're welcome.
Draft materials not scanned

See originals in folder