M: This is an interview with Sheriff Bob Watson. I am in his office at the Larimer County Courthouse. The date is August 17, 1976, and my name is David McComb. We're going to talk about the Big Thompson. The first question involves just what you're talking about and that is, preparation for disaster.

In the disaster literature, the people that come out the worst are the people that don't think about it before it happens. You came out very well and obviously there is preparation for disaster before it hits. So let me ask you a general question: What kind of experience, training, did your people have before this thing hit?

W: Well, I think the Sheriff's Office is unique, and it's unique by statute. We're charged with all search and rescue in the county, so we have to orient around that. We're charged with suppression of all fires outside of unincorporated areas, such as forest lands, that don't have regular fire districts. So, as a result of that, I have concentrated through the efforts of Captain John Englebert and myself a coordinated effort to address ourselves to those areas. At times it's been hard to build because it's hard to get funding for something that hasn't happened.

M: Right.

W: And it's hard for commissioners to fund that and justify it with the general public, spending large amounts of money to build equipment and that sort of thing. So what we have done is every year increased and fortunately we were at a point that we were probably far ahead, in that area, of many of the Front Range departments.

And, in fact, many of the departments were beginning to copy our fire operation. Out people that were being trained here were being flown into Idaho, Wyoming, places like this. The nucleuses were formed; group leaders
originated from some of our fires. They took groups of 20-25 people in and worked operations similar to this on a smaller scale so that we had several nuclei built within, say, 150 volunteers that could work independently. We had crew leaders in those so we did have chain of command somewhat established.

M: But where did your people get the training to train others?

W: Experience.

M: Okay. They've built this out of their own experience.

W: They built this out of experience. We've paid them on actual combat missions. We call them combat missions, $2.50 an hour. And, from this group, many of them supplemented their summer incomes, some of the forestry students out at the college and just plain volunteers from all facets of life . . . basically, young people, 25 to 30 years of age . . . basically college-oriented people.

John himself has a degree in wildlife management and biology. And he has a fantastic knowledge of the terrain, the capabilities of man, the endurance of an ox, the stride of Paul Bunyan. He's the Paul Bunyan of Larimer County, and I've always said so. He has a fantastic abundance of energy.

But, like all of us, he gets to the point that he wears himself out. And then we all get into irrational decisions.

This is something that anybody needs to think about in the future is to zero in on your key personnel and develop people who have that capability of just coming in and taking at a moment's glance and analyzing the situation and carrying on until the guy can come back and take it over himself after a few hours' sleep.

And I think we've built this in. I think it was existing. It was a
kind of a sleeping giant, so to speak. And we were criticized somewhat in
some of the press, especially in the fact that I had so many special dep­
uties around. You know it was a "political boondoggle" sort of thing.
But many of those kids wouldn't be voting for me; after all they're not
going to be in the state.

They're just people working, and they had a real fellowship and real
desire and from that dedication, I think, is a lot of it. And then our
deputies are that same type of people. They're people who yearly give me
300 to 400 hours overtime, some of them. Never get paid for it and know
they can't. Can't get the compensatory time, because there's just no back­
up for them. We run a marginal force.

M: Yes. You've got a lot of volunteers who have gone through training. They
are trained volunteers. You must have had something to do with that.

W: Yes, a lot of those people trained us, also, though. They came to us with
expertise in mountain climbing. They came to us with scuba divers. They
came to us with organizational people who went out and got their own equip­
ment. They bought their own equipment. They came equipped. They came to
give and to learn, and we combined the two together.

M: For example, you have a motorized patrol of four-wheel drive vehicles.
Apparently this is a volunteer organization.

W: Yes. This is something I inherited. I'm not responsible for that. I think
some of our programs . . . we would like to go further than that. We would
really like to educate these people in all facets. Time is a factor there,
and money's another one.

M: But apparently you provide some expertise to train these people. Is this
something that Englebert would do?

W: Englebert does a great deal of this. Ed Rupert over in underwater search
and rescue, and they used those guys up in there 'till they got big festered abscesses under their suits from staph (staphylococcus) infection and things like this, recovering bodies and what have you.

But it takes . . . you have to have people who know machinery. You have to have people that know how to build roads. You have to . . . they have to be workers. They just have to "gut it" out at times. They have to live in adverse conditions when they're up there.

M: But you, before the Big Thompson hit, you knew who these people were. They'd been trained. They were sort of on call, so to speak.

W: Yes. We just had them on the pot within a matter of a few hours because we knew where they were. Then John knew all the back-up people, you know, like Blair Nilsson [State search and rescue officer] down at the Civilian Defense, and he has his finger on so many groups all over the country, organized groups.

You see, you get all kinds of volunteers, but you don't want them. It isn't that they aren't competent, but you don't have time to organize them, so you tend to go towards organized groups, and you turn people down, and people become disheartened, and they start bad-mouthing you and that sort of thing.

But really, you're going for organized groups and police groups are organized to deal with emergencies where church groups are organized to deal with emergencies in church kitchens and things like this, you see. Not being critical of them.

Because you take the Mennonites that came in here; they flew in at own expense, many of them. And fantastic young people . . . give them any kind of a dirty job. They don't choose their jobs; they take their jobs, that you have for them, and they stay on, and they don't leave when they
get bad job, like a lot of volunteers.

You put in ninety volunteers and turn around, and you've got ten after the first body gets pulled out or something of this nature, you see. But when you have organized groups, it tends . . . you can organize them and keep them moving. You can control them, and you can provide for them because they help you.

And they don't give you a bunch of conflicting stories. They don't feed you a lot of rumor and that type of thing. And so when they talk to you, you can say, "Well, John needs what he's asking for." You have that dependability already built into the group, and that report is there, so you have an evaluating system built into it to begin with.

M: Okay, let's get into the . . .

TELEPHONE RINGS.

W: Excuse me.

M: Okay, we're going again. Let's talk a little bit about the warning and how you mobilized all this business.

W: Well, actually the warning that we gave wasn't very efficient, and it couldn't be in the time that we had. I think we had less than an hour probably.

And when you drive from Loveland up the Canyon and warn what people you can, and you have to stop intermittently and tell people in low-lying areas to get out, and then you have to repeat it and sometimes . . . here you got a person setting along next to a crystal stream. He's been tubing down it; he's been fishing in it; his kids have been wading in it. And two hours later you're telling him to get out.

And he's saying, "This guys got to be out of his mind." They say, "How high is the water going to get? Is it going to get ankle deep in here? Is it going to get up to the tops of our wheels? Is it going to
get on our trailers."

And we say, "We don't know; go to high ground. Forget your trailers if you don't want to pull them out and go to high ground." That's all they had to do. There was a ridge in there. They could have walked up, got on high ground and stayed there.

But people couldn't conceive this. The people living in the Canyon ... I talked to Mr. Tregent at Glen Comfort. He lived there for 48 years. Ran a business there. He left when it got up to his clothesline. At that time it was about twelve-foot deep in the river.

As he started out, he tells me the story that the Woodrings who drowned (Mr. and Mrs. Woodring) had disappeared off the road right in front of him. He had his ninety-year old mother with him. He started back out of the area to get back to Glen Comfort, and then he was cut off on both sides, and he spent up on the mountainside all night in a car with his mother and then came out of it.

The warning system, you know, if you were to go through and take a plan and say "The river's going to hit here so don't build here" and then, when you go up there and see what the debris does and how the Master changes our plans, that you might well have put the houses in the wrong place and maybe one that looked like it was in lowland, really because of the natural turn of the river was in better shape because the force would be abated as it went past him. And, you see so many things that you couldn't explain away.

BREAK IN THE TAPE

M: Machine's going again. We're talking about the warning process. And the calls, of course, came in about the flooding. You'd sent your patrol in there. You commented about the ... how people would disbelieve what
they were being told about the warning, and that you might have to tell
them several times, I suppose. You commented about an old man who'd lived
there for awhile.

W: I think his own testimony on there is that he made his own judgments based
on more experience in that area than mine and decided to stay and finally
decided to leave and then changed his mind again.

M: Was there any possibility of any other kind of warning mechanism? You
sent your patrols out; they were using their loudspeakers. They were knock­
ing on doors. Telephone communication?

W: Well, telephone communication, of course, was, at its best, not too good
up through there. You have six, eight party lines. And, if there were
a way that you could break in, you know, similar to ... maybe what we
need in areas like that is an organization that sprung up out of London, the
warden, the air raid warden-type situation.

Fire departments use it to call up their volunteers. You just have
one set of telephones that ring the number and everybody listens.

And if we had something like that, sporadically disbursed up through
the Canyon while it's still intact, to hit those people.

But even the Fire Department, you know, they had some warning, but
their reaction was the best they could give. But if we had in those areas
a group of people who could then take care of it, block warden-type thing,
then I'm sure you could, and plan in their community buildings where they
have their meetings and their gatherings, a basic plan so they could assume
that. But then it goes by the way of attrition.

Right after World War II we talked about the atom bomb, and we had
all kinds of literature and Civilian Defense, and we had the stores based
to set up a major hospital. We didn't have to utilize either one of those
here, but we still have that potential of two major hospitals in Larimer County, field hospitals. Any very little food supplies, however. Simply because people haven't looked at Civilian Defense as something other than an atomic warfare-type situation. I think our Civilian Defense director in the county draws $300, $400 a month now. He can save the county more than that just by his picking up of surplus Army equipment that's available to the County and other areas, so he more than pays his salary.

But, if we're going to have one, then he should be realistically involved. And it should be on an active, on-going thing, even though people aren't listening, as I talked to you about warning them before the flood-type thing.

And here--what are we talking about, thirty years since World War II. Noah built an ark in 120 years, and now we've taken a fourth of that time to talk to people, and they haven't listened either, because they're waiting for the crack of doom and that sort of thing. But other things happen to them in the interim.

I think it was last night I saw on T.V. a volcano to be soon erupting down in Mexico, and it said it would be the force of an atom bomb. At the same time I thought I heard of another earthquake over in China. I don't know that this is true. I missed part of the news. But I got on the tail end that they had another one over there.

But the amazing thing about this one . . . this disaster that we had . . . and I came down through there, and I had the impression that "this is America." Because people were in there doing things.

And over in China we can't even get a number of casualties. We can't even get the word out of that country. And yet we're sending aid in billions of dollars to various countries, and we're loaning money to our local res-
idents at 6-3/4 percent and we're giving their tax money away to other countries without any restraint at all, and yet we're saying "You can have it if you can assume a loan." Or, "We'll give you a $5,000 grant; which won't cover it.

So we need some adjustment here. We need to do some planning for disaster within our own country. You know, the slogan of Civilian Defense back twenty-five years ago in the first schools I went to as a command officer was "Self-help and mutual aid." And you can't help anybody else if you don't help yourself and make yourself self-sustaining first.

M: I need to ask you a little bit about the organization. You know they had the warning; the flood hit. I assume that you were down there pretty quick.

W: I was at the mouth of the canyon when the siphon went out, and the big propane tanks come whistling through there with their ruptured valves and sound screeching down through there. We didn't know whether it was the canyon ... the water coming down the canyon ... what it was, but we realized at that point, even though there was high ground there above us where we had planned to set up a command post, that we would be an isolated command post.

So we removed ourselves to higher ground, based on the experience of the 1965 flood when I was a police officer in Loveland and did a lot of work on that one. And so I had some experience with the terrain and some of the problems it would create down below.

So, based on that, we set it up at the Merri-Ax. But we made a mistake in that that our communications ... it wasn't really a mistake ... but our communication wasn't the best, and we didn't have the best to begin with. If we'd had some sort of portable tower and a better auxiliary system ... we were using a truck, you know, and running it 24 hours a day.
And that was our Command Post. Other than the fact that we had a building inside. But our radios were working out of the truck. The State Patrol moved in with their mobiles and were a great help to us. They're very efficient.

M: You must have been down there, what? Late Saturday night? If you were down . . .

W: Yes, I started about 8:15 Saturday night.

M: Okay. There are a lot of newspaper reports about a wall of water. Was there a wall of water? Or was it a rise?

W: I think eventually it got to be a wall of water. But I think it was a gradual rise. When you go look at the damage, you see it start that the upper end is kind of a tributary-type thing, and then as it picks up the water as it goes on down, then it becomes a wall, and then it becomes filled with debris; then it becomes . . . when it gets down into the Narrows itself it's like loading a shotgun . . . a muzzle-loading shotgun . . . filling it full of shrapnel and iron nails and everything else, just a juggernaut of force coming out.

Somebody said something like 400,000 pounds of pressure per foot, something of this nature . . . that's just an estimate by some of the engineers. And I suspect that they're right the way that thing came through there. Whenever you take boulders that are the size of this room and you roll them around like marbles out in the yard, you know . . .

M: Did you happen to see the siphon go?

W: Yes, I was standing right there when the siphon went out.

M: Was the water as high as the siphon? Or was it . . . ?

W: No, the water shot the support of the siphon out on the north side and just ripped the canyon wall out and that siphon weighed something, they
tell me, like a little over a 1,000 pounds per running foot, the steel itself... plus the fact that it was full of water.

M: That's right.

W: And so when that support buckled, it just ripped it out of there and moved it downstream a couple of hundred yards, just like a big old toy.

M: Could you estimate how high the water was at the time it took that siphon out?

W: I couldn't estimate it, but it's been established, I think, at nineteen feet above the river bottom. And then afterwards, looking at it the next day, it appeared to be down to bedrock. It just kind of flushed the canyon out to rock. And I thought they would never find enough stuff in there to build a road so they got down in there with those big 'dozers and rippers and stuff and started moving the rubble, up, boulders, you know, 100 to 200 pound boulders and that sort of thing.

And four feet underneath that, they dug up a Datsun. So when you talk about finding bodies like some of these eastern people are talking about. We ain't going to find them. It takes you a crack--what six foot-long, eighteen-inches-wide, and six-inches-deep to put a body in.

When you can bury a car in that kind of debris, and hit it just by happenstance... nobody knows what the bottom of that river really looked like. And nobody knows how many of those huge boulders may be final resting places underneath for somebody like this.

M: So there's going to be a list of missing people.

W: That we're never going to find. And there are going to be people who were never on that list. See, we're living in a generation of nomads, right now, nomadic-type people, young people, backpackers, moving through the country, sleeping along riverbeds. Not hoboes. Just kids wanting to see
if they can do it.

We don't know how many of those there were in the Canyon. And people who have set up residences in old dilapidated structures and so on along there that are nomads to the extent that maybe their families haven't known about them for years, haven't heard from them.

So how do you establish who was in there? License plates, engine numbers on automobiles, but then when you look at an automobile, and it looks like one of these aluminum pepsi cans somebody stepped on and the license number is downstream ten miles from there.

And then downstream from that: ten miles is another group of automobiles that have been wrecked out and junked out that have been used for rip-rap in the river since 1965, then you sort them out through the rubble to find out. You know, fantastic!

M: Fantastic problem. Yes. I would assume that, seeing that siphon go, you decided that you had a big problem on your hands. Maybe before then you had.

W: Well, I assumed that we well could have. The flood before it come down the Buckhorn into the Thompson had an influence that . . . created by the same type situation. I think there's something like seven inches of rain that particular time. Then the reservoir, the Buckhorn Reservoir, which is . . . not too much water in it, maybe a lot of silt in it. The fact that every ravine became a water course and for two or three days after the water's still running . . . there's no rain but the water's still running down those water courses, and it just cut river beds down through in some of those canyons, clear down to rock. All the silt and everything is gone, trees with it where before it was just a little glen up through there, you know. And you had very seldom a spring full of water coming down there.
M: So you knew you had a problem

W: We knew we had plenty of problems.

M: So what do you do? Set up a Command Post at the Merri-Ax. And who do you call?

W: Well, we call the local helicopter service at St. Anthony's. We know we're going to have casualties. We knew we're going to have fatalities.

M: This is Ag Helicopters.

W: Then we set up the morgue. We know we're going to have those kind of people. And we call to try to get a location for the morgue and, fortunately, the hospital had just been abandoned. We had a beautiful setup there. The doctors and nurses and people like that. Their response was fantastic.

M: Were you prepared for that heavy number of bodies?

W: No, but through this thing, comes a man from the Atomic Energy Committee who had worked with them. I don't know him. He knew everybody to get in touch of. He arranged for infra-red flights at supersonic altitudes. I don't know that it was ever taken. I hope that it had been, and we get feedback on it.

He arranged for infra-red from helicopters, heat source-type things. We had people from Pueblo who had hand-held sensors. We had scent dogs moved in. This is in the second day, start looking, soon as we can get back into the rubble.

But the fantastic thing is that you don't walk on that stuff for two or three days because every step is torture. You're down to your knees in mud and mire. So you just ride the perimeter and you never get into the debris piles. We're just now getting into a lot of those.

You need your ... you know eventually you're going to need your Corps of Engineers. You're going to need the Governor because you're beyond your County limitation of funding. The Governor knows he's going
to need somebody else, and so he has to take a look at it. So he comes up; he took a ride with us, took a look at it. Made an evaluation in the proper manner, not setting there waiting for word pictures but coming up and taking a look at things. Then he could really assess it.

Then comes the press, literally hordes of them. Then you think, well, you need a personnel officer; you need some public information officer.

And who does it become. It becomes the Sheriff because obviously he's the best oriented to what's going on. In essence, then, he has all the other decisions to make ultimately. But then you develop people like Captain B [Bill] Thomas who had been to a school on disasters out in California. And Lieutenant [Marvin] Schlageter with the Highway Patrol who had been to the same school. And they were put into towns of, say 20,000 to 30,000 population and simulated disaster-type things where you don't even know the town, and you marshall the force. In those situations.

And those two gentlemen were invaluable in those areas.

And it seemed as though we went through . . . that every time there was a job came up or somebody suggested we needed to do this or that, you would turn to who would be the most likely one, and he said, "I'm working on that." It was happening.

M: Okay. Now all these people have to have a focal point. You know, you've got the military coming in; you got the Red Cross; you got the Salvation Army; you got, eventually, the Mennonites, you got volunteers of all kinds. Somebody's got to organize that, and that must have fallen right on you.

M: Yes. Shared with guys like John. But while they were taking the course of addressing themselves to the emergencies, then the other people started to follow through. The Corps of Engineers, the disaster people. You see they couldn't work for a week until they got all of the ramifications, their legal entities, and everything. And got all their contracts let and
things like this.

So you continue to work during that time, but then you're faced with de-accelerating your people and getting the adrenaline out of their system to turn loose of those jobs that they're holding to so tenaciously.

And saying to them, "Well, look, I know you're not going to like it, but here's a guy that's going to be taking over, and he isn't going to do it the way you would like, but it's going to have to interface in here some­where." So then that stage of interfacing.

And, as the person in charge of it, you have to look beyond today and not having had that experience, you have to accept it. And it's offered there. And you have to make evaluations on how you best utilize it. And then comes the problem of exchange of information with those people.

And the Corps of Engineers come in with basic little topography maps that showed with a green line that this is a mountain ridge, and they were very happy with what they had. And then within four or five days through Mr. Hogan and Associates [Hogan and Olhausen], we developed blowups of the whole canyon area--existing and pre-existing--photographs, four-foot-large, that showed us every house and automobile and everything that was setting down in there. Aerial maps.

And when we gave these to the Corps of Engineers, you know, here's your interchange. Use your local resources, and you'd be surprised how strong they are. Particularly in this area with the University of Colorado and CSU. They have all the people who have the expert help. And then your state health organizations, you know, meshing in with your county health organizations. When you have health problems that are immediate, your wells are contaminated and you know that people are going to--then you propagandize (put out information as to conditions). And
your messages out on the people are in primitive fashions to begin with and then by personal contact and then by radio, then by word of mouth, that sort of thing, you know.

M: What you're really describing is sort of a changing, evolutionary, managerial-type of problem. You're going to be using some people in the emergency and then these have to phase into, say the Corps of Engineers will take over.

W: This is true. And then comes the conflict with the people. Because, you see, here comes the Health Department, they're going to put the big 'X' on you. This one stays, and that one goes. Tear down one house and leave another standing next door. You get into the conflict... one guy gets a generator, another guy don't.

It's timing sometimes, and it's communication fed out to you of needs. And then you react to those needs, and sometimes you over-react to needs, and you have more critical areas.

M: There's a question here of when you sort of pull out, too. You're in there as the central police authority, I would assume.

W: Yes, that's true. The Sheriff is the chief law enforcement in the county.

M: Okay. But then you have to... say the federal disaster people coming in, and how do you pull your people out and let their people sort of take over?

W: We just take over the law enforcement function, then. And we try to take care of the things that sift down through the cracks that the federal agencies can't address themselves to because of legislation. So then you have to reorganize again and start going into those groups that were serving your community in the need areas prior to this, your House of Neighborly Service [Loveland Social service agency], for instance. The Salvation Army and the
Red Cross and the service clubs, your volunteer groups that spring up, your funding that comes by donation. And trying to group them into all those areas, forming a long-range group chairman by somebody who will do you a good job in that area so you can kind of disassociate yourself. Initially, you come in there because you're kind of a traffic policeman for all agencies. I don't mean traffic policeman for cars, but . . . .

M: I know what you mean.

W: I mean moving people and manipulating people and being manipulated by people. Never getting to the place where you prostitute people and use them to any extent at all. Then you have the situation that develops along where you have agencies following agencies, like the people who come in to do the disaster control. They follow disasters. They know how to do it. They have equipment to do it. They make money out of doing it.

Local people then don't get some of the contracts that they're capable of because these people are there. They've had the experience, and so the Corps of Engineers of course, trying to expedite things probably get into some of those people. They do all the best they can in hiring local people. Then you begin to get a few little animosities and things built up there which are normal situations.

M: Are these pointed at you?

W: Oh, I suppose eventually they will be, some of them, and probably justifiably so, in some instances. I think one of my sergeants summed it all up very coherently about the tenth day. He'd been on the body recovery and identification deal, kind of a morbid type job. And he said, [that] he'd picked up a few little criticisms . . . and he said, "Sheriff, whenever you get to the place that you do a good job, a near perfect job on a disaster, there's only one thing apparent, you're having too many dis-
And I think he summed it up right there.

So what you do is the best job you can on a disaster, and the next one may not be like it, but there's certain things that are pertinent to every disaster. It's a people business to begin with, and the same thing that motivates those people is the response that you have to maintain your cool all the way through.

You have to realize that you're going to be dealing with those people tomorrow in another situation. So sometime you have to spend valuable time just listening to get rid of their frustrations because you're going to be back asking that same person for something else later.

And this is the hard thing to do. I think I lost my cool four or five times during this whole thing, just completely for fifteen minutes. And this isn't good, 'cause these things live with you afterwards.

But I think our people basically adopted that philosophy. They had it inbred into them to begin with. That you're only as good as the people that you serve, or the informants that you have.

M: How did you handle a situation of, say, competing authority. I could see whereby, you're down there on the spot; you've got your officers deployed; you're bringing in various organizations, and say a military man comes in, National Guard or something, and might try to usurp your authority, that is, to take over a function without clearing it with you or something like that. How do you, as the sort of the man at the center, assert that you're in charge?

W: This never happened through the whole operation. It just didn't happen. The only time it ever happened is when some citizen tried to organize a little group to serve a little pocket of the area, and he wasn't looking
at the whole ball game, he was looking at first base-type situation.

But it's amazing and everybody has made comment on this situation, that I think the community itself was unique in this area, that they're a close-knit community; they've always responded well. United Fund always went over the top before the deadline, that sort of thing. And they've always responded.

And I think that the agencies that come in, nothing officious.

You know I served as a staff sergeant in the army--or buck sergeant, rather, that's as far as I ever got. And I'm sitting down with two or three generals talking about things of common interest, and they're saying, "Ask the Sheriff, you know, and whatever he says, that's what we'll do." And then I say, "Then what do you think about it?"

And he tells me what his opinion is and we reach a common ground, and this won't take all day. We do it then because we have to expedite it. This is the way it happens. You move a Chinook, or you move a two-place chopper in or a ... what do you do? Do you call up the reserves?

I first thought maybe we'd call up the engineer group that we had here in Fort Collins. No, that's too long a process and it takes the President to do that because they are Reserve, they're not regular Army, so, you learn all these things and when somebody tells you this, you accept it.

And you don't say, "Well, he's trying to stall me" because then you say, "What are the alternatives?" And he gives you the alternatives and there's always something there for you. So you have to learn to utilize and accept and bypass and work around those things and keep your diplomacy going constantly.

M: Yes. A lot of this is informal?
W: Yes.

M: Is there somewhere along the line where you start writing out orders rather than giving them just verbally?

W: I think our first writing out orders was on passes-type thing. I think you make a mistake when you get into autocratic situations. Where you get into that area of mistake is when you start manning some of your critical roadblocks, for instance, with civilian personnel because you run out of regular people, and then you begin to get complaints because they're looking at it from an autocratic standpoint. "The Sheriff says this." Not "the Sheriff means this." Or "what can we do." "How can we help," you know.

And making decisions in a democratic way in between the autocratic and the democratic and the State Patrol were able to do this. If somebody at the checkpoint didn't ask enough questions because he had 200 people waiting in line, then that guy could filter it down and say, "Why don't you tell them this down below?" He could ask a few more questions and maybe pass the guy through.

But, here again, that's where you get back to your organized groups and people who know the area. And try to keep those people working in the areas that they're best qualified for. And when you have some kind of knowledge of what people are working with, it isn't too hard to do. They sort of . . . water sort of seeks its own level . . . it doesn't do it instantaneously . . . that's a heck of a colloquium [colloquialism] to use right now . . . is water seeking its own level. (Both laugh.)

M: You sealed off the Canyon pretty well with roadblocks. What is your rationale for that?

W: We sealed it off before the Canyon because of the chaos, the control that
we knew we were going to have to need, and the unknown hurdles that people
would have to go through, the bridges that were out, the inaccessible areas,
the fact that we were going to have to get relief into those areas, and we
didn't want the roads all plugged up with cars. We didn't want to create
another situation of chaos.

We had chaos, and we didn't want to get order and then turn it back
into chaos again.

So we have to make that decision, and then people fight those decisions
of roadblocks. Then, after about the sixth day, you take it off. You take
it off at 5:00 in the afternoon, and they come back to you and say, "Hey,
what are you doing taking off the roadblocks?" They've been arguing with
you in line. And you say, "Well, by now, you should be self-sufficient."

But they're not self-sufficient, they've still got a foot of mud in
their house. They can't live in it. They've been trying to get in, in
dibbles and dabs, between jobs and clean it up, and so you make an assump­
tion that, after a week, they should do something themselves, and they
can't.

So then you put your roadblock on for another week, and you do it
within a half-hour. And the next time you change it, you change it at
9:00 in the morning so they have all day to adjust to it so you don't go
through that same hassle again. And then you gradually phase it out into
those areas that you control.

Somebody had an article that says, "Sheriff tries to wrest back the
river for the people . . . to get it back into their control." That was
sort of the essence of it. There's no way you can do that, but you try
to get control of the situation so they're able to go back and take up
what they have left.
M: Is looting a problem?

W: No great problem. I think one reason is the number of good police agencies we had that were available for that and the show of uniforms and the show of force and even our volunteers had Sheriff's patches so everybody would assume they're deputy sheriffs. Many of them weren't; they were just volunteers workers, but they had Sheriff's patches on, and people said, "We saw deputies everywhere."

And that deterrent factor plus the fact that we're in kind of a box canyon. To loot, you had to go in with a pack sack, so you'd take small items. They weren't hauling out TVs; there's a possibility that somebody went in there, one of the guys owning property and maybe hauled out a truckload of TVs.

We tried initially... it was too much of a task... to try to inventory those loads of stuff that came and associate them with a trip sheet. It was something that could be initiated later on where the guy would, as he loaded his pickup, you would initiate a system.

As you went into the area that he would put down on that, and then when he came out, you could rapidly check through it and then you would know that he knew what he was going into. So you would have an association, some assumed honesty standard in this somewhere.

M: And what do you do when all your personnel and energy is focused on disaster. What happens to the rest of the county for police protection?

W: Well, you can call on your city police to fill in.

M: Is that what was done?

W: That happened a lot. And then you just double the activity of the people you have outside the area. I mean your patrol... your dispatch officer worked twenty-nine hours first shift and that sort of thing.
M: So your people are working longer hours.

W: They're just working longer hours.

M: Okay. The newspapers indicate a certain shortage of personnel, say for manning the roadblocks, for patrolling the Canyon, and so on. Is that true?

W: I think of the proper kind of people, yes. Using volunteers, no. But, based on the merit of the volunteers against the trained officer, a shortage, yes.

You see, we have sixty-nine people here. When you take nine of them up into the jail for the administration of the jail, and then you have people in court, and you have your investigative people, you have your search and rescue people, you have . . . basically you get down to where you have about thirty patrolmen.

You break that into three shifts, and actually four shifts, because one of them has to be a relief shift, and that gives you about 7.5 people per night to run the county.

Now when you take their days off and their vacations, you run down to where you have two or three people on any given night patrolling the county, even with a force of sixty-five.

So, what I'm saying is that, at the top level, a lot of it is consumed in administration of it, and if you can ever get the equal balance to where you have your patrol section built up, then you can address yourself to it properly.

But it takes County funds and the County funds are going to diminish in this area, too. Because here you had a tax base recently that was raised quite a little bit, and on the anticipated revenue, they could even look at a mill levy cut. But now they can't look at a mill levy cut
because all that property up through the Canyon is no longer a tax base.

Even though it's still solid, it's not a tax base. It'll have to be re-evaluated. It'll also . . . the taxes that they paid on it last year are re-deemable to them under disaster clause, and the taxes they'll pay this year are redeemable to them, so there'll be two years of taxes that were anticipated revenue on the one hand and already spent revenue on another hand, and where does it stop?

Does the State pick up the taxes that the County got their share of last year, or do we just wipe that out and forget about it and pull it out of some other disaster fund, or what? I don't know the answer to that, but it's . . . the economy of the County is going to be directly affected by the valuation and the lack of valuation, plus the fact that business itself and people going up the Canyon . . . another arm into Estes Park.

They're very critical because of the fact that we had to shut off Highway 7 and 36, but when you went down 36, and it's one big washout, you knew why it was shut off. You knew why 7 was okay because it was okay. in one lane, and they were ready to come down and just move the roadblocks out.

M: So you're pulling into a long-running problem of taxation, of depressed economy, perhaps, injured economy, unemployment.

W: Displaced people . . . the schools, free books, free lunch programs for some of those people, the whole ramification of a new bunch of people who were self-sufficient prior to this who now, no way can be self-sufficient. Give them a $25,000 loan at 6-3/4 percent, and they already owed $25,000. The only alternative they have is a $5,000 grant, and that won't answer their problems, and they can't have both. They either have
one of the other. So, if they owed $25,000, they pick up another $25,000, they're not paying 6-3/4 percent, they're paying 13 percent.

M: So these people are really wiped out.

W: They're wiped out, and some people who would never go bankrupt would probably go bankrupt, and then based on "Can we even go back and reclaim our land?" And when all the topsoil is washing off, all you've got is rock, who wants it and who could you sell it to?

M: There may be a moratorium against building in the floodplain.

W: Well, they've talked some about a mortorium, and I think they backed off of it because there was some conflict about if this happens . . . if you put a moratorium on building, then we can't enter into contracts to build because we can't enter a contract if a person can't build, so you're wasting our time as a federal agency in here.

That argument came up, but I think the federal money would still be available, whatever amount they set aside. It's just a question of stretching out the time of it. And these people . . . a lot of them are making decisions on what they're doing . . . either borrowing money or taking grants now, based on the hysteria, which is bad. They need time, and yet there isn't time to adjust all the other facilities because here we are at the end of August, and we got September and October, and we're into winter. And we've got to get things done up there, if people are going to exist in that Canyon.

So there's going to be a time in the near future when somebody's going to have to make a decision. And, hopefully by then, they'll have some good hard facts. And I'm sure the Commissioners and the state are analyzing these facts. I know Mr. [Dwight] Bower in the Road Department is doing a tremendous job, and he's gathering facts all the time. "Do we build this road back or do we make a better road or what do we do?"
Based on federal funding, probably we'll go ahead and rebuild it since federal funding is available now. And the strange thing is we say, "Well, yeah, but that's our money. It's tax money, and so it's federal, and we're all reaching for."

But the other aspect of it is that we send money to other countries for disasters without any strings attached whatsoever. And then our own people have a disaster, and we start signing up the papers to pay for it. And they've already paid for it with their taxes and so on. And they're saying, "Here's somebody down in Guatemala can have this, but we can't have it." Well, I guess that's what we are and, like I said earlier, this is America. You see people going in . . . they're moving right in.

If we were over in China, we wouldn't even know the casualties yet. They have an earthquake, they don't even tell us about it. But we have one here, and everybody moves in. You see people helping people. And this is America. This is what it's all about.

M: In a way that's a tribute to your community, what you're saying.

W: It's a tribute to the whole nation. Because it's happened in Podunk, Iowa tomorrow, the same way.

M: Let me ask you one last general question. I know I'm intruding on your lunch period. This disaster, everything that's happened to you, what kind of effect is it going to have on the Sheriff's Department, do you think? You've pointed to long-run effects for the community, what about the Sheriff's Department?

W: Oh, we're going to work our tails off for awhile, but it's really bonded us together, and it's bonded law enforcement agencies from Pueblo clear up the Front Range. Even over in Pitkin County, they sent people over to help us.
M: Really?

W: And it's hopefully from this, we're going to put together a critique: Captain Thomas, myself, John Englebert, the news media. Some of them have promised me they would save all the film clip that they're not using, put it into a documentary, get into the road map situation we have. Maybe put on a two-week school for all the county sheriffs and all the chiefs of police who would like to attend at the Colorado Law Enforcement Training Academy.

And we'll go down there and let them tear us apart, and we'll put on a critique situation, and we'll put on a "show-you-like-it-is" type thing. And, hopefully, the next guy who has one will at least know the agencies that he can talk to. And this will again tie all of our local agencies just a little tighter together.

M: Okay. Let me close this interview. Do you have a general comment of anything you want to add to this? [Watson laughs.] [Laughter.]

W: It's hard to sum it up in one, except there's a poem by Helen Steiner Rice that somebody sent to my wife, and I intend to try to get about 200 copies of it to send to victims. And it's entitled "The State of the Raindrop" or something of this nature, and how raindrops become torrents and that sort of thing, and then how it tears up a life and then how afterwards, what it produces and then the new growth afterwards, and I think that really sums it up.

M: Thank you.
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