

Date June 21, 1979

Occupation: Cumberland County Commissioner

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember when and under what circumstances you first heard about there being a problem at Three Mile Island?

NARRATOR: I was called by my wife, at my office, who heard something on the radio that there was a problem involving a nuclear radiation leak.

INT: Do you remember what day of the week that was?

NAR: That was the 28th of March.

INT: And um, did you know that there was a reactor there before?

NAR: Oh, yeah.

INT: Did you know how far it was from Carlisle?

NAR: I never thought of it in terms of Carlisle, I thought of it in terms of my own community, New Cumberland.

INT: Which is where you're living, how far is it from New Cumberland?

NAR: Uh, about ten miles.

INT: When you first heard about it, what did you think about, did you think it was...

NAR: Well, I reacted as a public official and as the commissioner in charge of emergency operations of the county. I, frankly on the 28th, wasn't deeply concerned that we would have a major problem. Umm...I quite frankly felt it was a minor thing, that it would dissipate.

INT: Did your opinion of that change?

NAR: Rapidly.

INT: What changed?

NAR: Uh, as events began to develop, we first had assurances on the morning of the 29th, that it wasn't any major problem, that it was all under control, it was contained. The doubts started creeping in when the media on the 29th and the 30th started emphasizing that this was a very, extremely significant nuclear accident. And that contrary to what Lt. Governor Scranton had said on the 28th and 29th, that there wasn't any problem any longer, it was apparent that there was still a serious problem that they (garbled) may have been to the point where they lost control. And that's where my anxiety as a citizen and as a public official became much more deep.

INT: As a result of what you're describing as conflicting reports?

NAR: Conflicting reports of the media sensationalizing it, uh the whole combination of events, led me to believe that we were by no means in a safe position.

INT: So at that point at least you began to seek further information?

NAR: Well, I had to. I had to.

INT: Given your responsibility?

NAR: Given my responsibility, we had to determine in fact I remember it very clearly, I was, I have contacts in the administration in the White House, which I very rarely invoked. But on Friday, that Friday, I was so concerned about what was happening up here because the national television had just come over the air and said we may have a melt down. I used that contact in the white house to get through to the chairman of the NRC who I did talk to get his estimate of what in fact was happening up here because up until that time, I was fairly confused based on the conflicting reports. And the NRC chairman really didn't, couldn't say definitively whether there would or wouldn't be a melt down. But he put my mind a little bit at rest to the point where I didn't have to be concerned with an immediate evacuation of Cumberland County. Nevertheless, from the 28th on through that weekend and well into the next week, I spent my hours up here in a general way supervising in preparation of an emergency evacuation plan. In the event we needed to use it.

INT: Had you, had somebody asked you to do that, were there other sources of information here also requesting that this be developed and so forth to develop an evacuation?

NAR: Well that was my county responsibility.

INT: What invokes that responsibility?

NAR: Okay, now I see the thrust of your question. The state didn't ask, we took our own initiative.

INT: That's the answer I was interested in, how did you feel the state was functioning in all this?

NAR: The state was, in my opinion, in retrospect and also at the time, by and large they were responding the best way they could have, given the information they had.

INT: Were they not getting appropriate information?

NAR: Well that's my opinion of today that they weren't getting it because nobody had it. At the time I didn't think they were getting it because of the Met Ed officials and their arrogance and unresponsiveness and the concern only for the image of Met Ed.

INT: But that was your judgment of the time, now, you feel that they didn't know or? Now, I feel it was a combination of factors. I still fault Met Ed's attitude not the fact that they had an accident, that anybody, that's human, but their attitude about the thing at the height of the crisis, and my own opinion hasn't changed from that.

INT: Do you think that they were in control of the situation over there?

NAR: No, no I don't think they were because, for whatever reason, I'm not saying it's all their fault that they weren't in control, but for whatever reason, I'd think they just didn't really know what was happening.

INT: Um, you might speak a little bit further about the federal role now, how do you feel that level of government responded, do you think it was responding appropriately?

NAR: It depends on what department you're talking about.

INT: Uh, all of the routes that might be involved?

NAR: The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which soon will be designated if its not now, responded in a very fine manner as far as their responsibility for the safety and welfare of the citizens. Not looking at what cause of that impairment of safety was. Uh, The NRC, I think they were, they were, a lot of them were in the dark. I think they did the best thing eventually that they could have in seizing control of the situation which uh . . . hadn't had. They sent a very, and the most significant thing that they could've done I guess, for a variety of reasons, was to send Harold Denton up here. His demeanor and his knowledge and all that did an awful lot to put this tri-county area at rest, psychologically, mentally or whatever.

INT: Did you find him, among the variety of at least publicly available sources as the most credible?

NAR: Yeah, well that's the issue. Nobody, this idiot Herbine, and that's for the record idiot Herbine, trying to cover his own butt. The confidence of the public had gone to zero as far as Met Ed's concerned because of him. You get somebody that is supposedly neutral and knowledgeable coming in uh, the credibility factor was there and we started listening and taking some confidence in what he was saying.

INT: You'd spoken slightly about this; I'd like to come at this head on now, to make a judgment about the media's function in all this?

NAR: Okay, the media played an extremely important role in the whole event. If for no other reason than, than in informing the public the minute by minute, hour by hour basis on what was happening. And what we should do. We as, in our capacity of being responsible for emergency measures that may have had to be taken, had to rely on the media to prolegate what we wanted to prolegate. By and large the local media including the local TV stations, local newspapers were bending over backwards to just stick to the truth and not to put a panic situation into the public. The national media was totally irresponsible in aggrandizing, in aggrandizing the whole event to the point where

the single most negative reaction to the nuclear accident was the hysteria of the relatives of most of the people in this area. Because they were just hearing national media. And friends of mine got calls from Athens, my relatives were calling in a panic in Minnesota, and it was like that across the board.

INT: Uh, Minnesota, I spent a lot of my life there.

NAR: My wife does, really where?

INT: Minneapolis.

NAR: The southwestern part.

INT: Um...I'm just...do you think they are in control of the situation over there now?

NAR: To say they're in control of it. Yes, they're in control of it in the sense, in the sense that there is no eminent public danger they're aware of.

INT: Did you make plans; let me ask this on two levels, how did the whole event restructure your work during that period of time?

NAR: It made it, it didn't restructure it, it just put absolutely everything on the back burner.

INT: And that meant you had to do what kinds of things?

NAR: I had to spend full time up here, not just work hours, I brought my family up here into Carlisle and ah devoted full time on the development of the evacuation.

INT: Umm...did it change any of your other routines, did you talk to your family about this as well as your co-workers and so forth. I mean you have a job responsibility and you have your family.

NAR: Well I moved my family out, I evacuated from New Cumberland.

INT: Can you talk about why you thought it was wise?

NAR: Well, I thought it was wise because I have a three year old daughter number one, We were within the ten mile radius I didn't want any, and my wife was getting very, very upset about what was happening. And it was just for the tranquility of the family and also for the effectiveness of my job performance. I wanted them near me and also out of the immediate danger zone which by and large Carlisle was not in.

INT: Did you talk about plans together about what your family would do in the event of an evacuation?

NAR: Well, we didn't know other than we got enough personal belongings to get out of there for whatever period of time would be necessary. One of my first reactions was

rather than deposit my paycheck which I had just gotten, I cashed it and got all cash, probably, there was a slight run on the banks.

INT: Yes I understand that, there in some cases might have been more than slight. Um, do you think that anything that happened at TMI might have affected your health or your family's health?

NAR: It's too early for me to tell. My instinct is no but that's the whole issue in this nuclear controversy. Nobody knows sufficiently for me to be satisfied.

INT: So you have some doubts, but you don't, your impulse is at this point that probably not, where you were and so forth?

NAR: Right.

INT: Would you attribute that to your distance from it or do you think that in general?

NAR: I just don't know. My instinct, based on instinct and basic reports on the level of radiation and all that I just have the instinct that no serious harm resulted.

INT: Did you have any concern about milk from the area?

NAR: Not seriously.

INT: Did you at any point during the sequence of events have any umm mental pictures or images of what might happen there?

NAR: In what sense?

INT: Ah, I'm really asking for visual images if the worst had happened.

NAR: Sure I had a visual image of the whole thing blowing up but, that was my biggest complaint was the way the media handled it. They did not go into educating the public to the effect that if it had melted down, it wouldn't have been way great big explosion and everybody reacts to the atom bomb.

INT: In other words they were not informing people that this was an unfounded fear.

NAR: Right, I only, I didn't have that unfounded fear because I was in a position to talk to the experts and have an understanding that that wasn't gonna happen. The fear then became secondary as to okay if there was a meltdown, and what level of radiation we were talking about and how far an area would you have to be to be out of it.

INT: Did you have any ideas about the effect that that would have, let us say the second worst, the actual worst thing would have happened rather than the imaginative? Did you have any sense of what the area might be like? How radiation would have affected life or

...

NAR: Again, it depends again on the parameter from the plant. The circumference really. And you know you hear reports that there would be massive death in the first couple of miles and then on about serious long term damage. And nobody really knew precisely the extent of that and the mileage effected.

INT: And that depended on a number of different things. Did you think about God during the incident at all?

NAR: Oh, yeah, Sure, as did many people. What he would allow and would not allowed the worst to happen.

INT: Did you pray?

NAR: I didn't specifically pray except in an unconscious way.

INT: Do you think this might be a message to us about this?

NAR: Now, you're getting into transcend...transcendentalism or something. I don't want to answer that. Ok, sorry.

INT: That's alright. Did you see yourself as adhering to some sort of code of responsibility or ethical code as you were dealing with the situation? Did you see yourself as living up to some sort of ethical code in your behavior during the crisis?

NAR: Absolutely, Three Mile Island presented the most awesome responsibility that I have been presented as the county commissioner, as to what to do under a situation of extreme pressure.

INT: Did you ever think about leaving?

NAR: In a fantasful way. I knew I couldn't.

INT: Because of the responsibility?

NAR: Because of the responsibility

INT: Do you find any conflict between . . .

NAR: No, I'd like to be candid about it. I felt much more secure by the fact that we were in Carlisle instead of New Cumberland.

INT: Did the event bring to mind any past experiences in your life?

NAR: No, but it brought to mind a hypothetical situation (unintelligible). Wondering what I'd been thinking if I had been in Vietnam or something very similar. I would think it would be a similar anxiety.

INT: That was what I was going to ask as the next question, whether or not you connected it with any sort of historical event.

NAR: In a psychological sense not in a historical sense. In being human in extreme pressure and fear for your life really.

INT: Did you see this as more or less a problem or similar to or more or less like a flood or hurricane or natural disasters?

NAR: There are similarities but there are vast differences and the difference is what exactly, is what proposed our most serious problem. Similarities were the implementation of the emergency machinery. To plan for, and provide for, the health and safety of a lot of our citizens in a situation where they would be out of their own habitats. So the...and we did have machinery that we could invoke to make those necessary preparations, unlike a flood and a fire or a chemical spill the parameters of the destruction, or the problem areas would, could be predictably defined. The problem with this thing was it couldn't be. You did not know the areas that were affected, you didn't know the enemy you were fighting, as a fireman going into a flood zone he knows exactly what the problem is he knows how to handle it or the fireman in the fire situation. Here you have our emergency service personnel going into a contaminated area hypothetically not knowing whether there was lethal radiation there or not.

INT: And not being able to tell either.

NAR: Right, so it was entirely different in that respect, that's what, that's what increased the anxiety two hundred fold.

INT: At any time during all of this did you think of any books you had read or fictions, or TV shows, or movies, we're into a more subjective realm.

NAR: No, there was, I had not seen the *China Syndrome* and my attitude was I've lived it I don't need to see it and that still is.

INT: Did you have any daydreams that you remember?

NAR: No, or nightmares either.

INT: No, sleeping dreams either, was your sleep disturbed apart from the fact that...

NAR: I was tired, no, not really, The Friday night before we evacuated it very much was. Friday night before the Saturday morning we evacuated all I could think of was getting up early and getting out. Now I tell you one of the deepest concerns was not so much the radiation but the attitude of the public on the highway was one of the first things, suggestions I gave on Wednesday when my wife called somewhat upset, I said go into the basement and stay in the house because they'll be nuts all over the highway that's more dangerous than that things gonna do. That was my first concern.

INT: Was that a concern as you were planning things to?

NAR: Yes, it was the foremost concern and that is why we bent over backwards to insure the public that we were not considering an eminent evacuation. We were just planning for

one. We wanted to keep the panic off the highways and the national media proceeded to incite the panic several times throughout the event. Which in hindsight may have been a hidden blessing since it inspired a lot of people to voluntarily evacuate to the point where had we had to evacuate on Sunday or Monday we had a good 30% to 50% of the West shore population already gone.

INT: So you were in a position not to have to deal with anywhere close to the numbers you would have had to . . . for.

NAR: Right. Exactly.

INT: So, your feeling about people that left the area that it was a kind of blessing and you don't think they were unwise to do so.

NAR: No, in fact I said on public air waves, I encouraged people to leave if for no other reason than it would make them feel better. I disagreed with the governor when he didn't close the schools beyond the five mile radius because the anxiety factor would be sharply reduced with the kids being home with the parents.

INT: I think we have some objective evidence. Did you see people around you change in any way during all of this?

NAR: I didn't see them change, I saw them react to a very troubling situation and I felt by and large they all reacted in a responsible manner. They arose to the occasion. Some of them didn't on, but I can understand why they didn't.

INT: Do you think it changed them in any lasting way?

NAR: Okay, as a human being, no. Apprehensiveness of nuclear power, yes. Across the board.

INT: Did it change you in any lasting way?

NAR: Well, not in personality, I've been the same, I'll give you some stuff to take along, I'll give you some insight. That's about all I can say on that.

INT: Did your opinion about nuclear energy, was it affected in any way by this? Did you develop...?

NAR: I have developed a deep apprehension.

INT: More so than before the accident?

NAR: Absolutely, I didn't think, in fact I quote it in a famous publication, I'm being cynical. The Rolling Stone Magazine, You have heard it. If it will help.

INT: We will be looking into all of this material too, we want to get first hand stuff in before we... (unintelligible)

NAR: I didn't think much of the Three Mile Island... after that not only was I aware of Three Mile Island but aware of nuclear power and also made some preliminary judgments that I, somebody had made the very sound observation that its one of those areas that effect the public safety so greatly possibly, that you shouldn't leave it in totally the hands of private enterprise the way NRC has apparently has done so up until now.

INT: In other words you think it might be more tightly regulated?

NAR: I mean, I think it will be, I think there's a lot of positive after effects from this thing. And in several directions people are taking a harder look at nuclear power the way it's been run. They're also in contest with this other energy problem...we hope. That's a mess we're getting into another mess.

INT: It took me 45 minutes to get gas at noon today... Is there anything else you would like to say about this?

NAR: Well, it's been, and no other than in conclusion it's been a heck of an experience the county went through, but I think the county is better vibed in the sense that we really beefed up our emergency operating procedures, now that we can just apply the principles we learned at Three Mile Island to other situations which we are doing presently. As far as the gas situation and the possible shutdown. We're invoking some of the lessons we've learned and now we're doing a survey of all the emergency service needs for gas in case they shut us down and so... In that sense, strictly from an emergency preparedness point of view, it's been a positive experience. Definitely.

INT: But otherwise we would rather not go through it?

NAR: Yeah because of anxiety. Yeah Ok.