

Date: June 5, 1979

Occupation: Student

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember when you first heard about the TMI incident?

NARRATOR: It was the morning of the first leak, and I think I walked into the radio station downstairs in the union and there were bulletins all across the teletype, and that was how I first learned of it.

INT: And that was the first morning? Can you remember what day of the week that might have been?

NAR: I think that was a Wednesday.

INT: At that point, did it worry you?

NAR: Yes, but not as much as it did later on.

INT: Had you known there was a reactor there before the incident?

NAR: Yes, but I didn't know exact location. I knew there was a nuclear plant, near Harrisburg.

INT: Do you know how far TMI is from us?

NAR: 25 miles.

INT: All right, you said initially you were concerned, but things changed? Can you explain how that went?

NAR: I believe that it was two days later, Friday morning, when I heard that there had been another *large, very large* leak... That's what triggered off, *real* concern.

INT: Real concern. Did you seek further information?

NAR: From whom?

INT: Well, after you first heard about it, did you seek further information from any source?

NAR: I kept up with it on the wire, that's about all I had time for.

INT: Did you talk with friends about it, or people who were working with you?

NAR: Umm-hmm. It was the only topic of conversation.

INT: Could you talk about that a little bit? What were you saying about it?

NAR: Well, it was at two levels. At the radio station, there was concern on how we should handle it, how we should cover it. And at...but that sort of became moot on Friday; it was obvious then that we had no choice but to cover it as extensively as we could.

INT: What made that obvious?

NAR: The atmosphere of... confusion, almost bordering at times on mass hysteria.

INT: Okay, among what group?

NAR: Students.

INT: Students here at Dickinson?

NAR: Students here at school. And at a personal level, I just – wasn't sure what was going to happen, and thought I would keep my eye on it as much as I could.

INT: How did you feel about other people's reactions?

NAR: Well, the... When people got hysterical, that sort of was comical in one regard, yet very easily understood. I think back about the one student who broke down in tears at that first public meeting. There was no call for that.

INT: So you went to the public meetings of the College?

NAR: Yeah, I think I missed only one, and at the same time I listened to some of it on the radio.

INT: Did you follow newspapers or radio or TV reports on the incident?

NAR: Radio,. Other stations, not our own.

INT: You were working for what station?

NAR: WDCV FM. I think I was following KYW, which is a news radio station in Philadelphia. More than any other.

INT: Would you describe this as following more that you would usually follow radio?

NAR: Yes.

INT: So you were paying more attention to information coming in and so forth?

NAR: Right.

INT: How did you feel about media handling of it, and this is kind of a complicated question for you, I guess, since you were part of the media.

NAR: Well I think the national media, at least initially, can't really be proud of the way they handled it. There were phrases used which did nothing more than to scare people. I think of Cronkite's lead, I think on Saturday... "On this, the whatever day of the worst nuclear accident in American history". You know, that didn't do a whole lot for people's confidence.

INT: What was that, do you remember the comment? That was his lead?

NAR: That was his lead into the TMI story, his opening paragraph, "on this, the third day of the worst nuclear accident in American history".

INT: And you regarded that as irresponsible? Or how do you want to describe it? I shouldn't put words in your mouth.

NAR: Irresponsible is a good word, and yet... It was factual. Because it was indeed, and is, the worst accident. It was just – it was irresponsible in the sense, the way that fact was conveyed.

INT: Okay. So you felt the local media... You were making a contrast between national media and the local media.

NAR: Local, even on a state-wide level, I think the state-wide media were at a definite advantage, let's say until the arrival of the federal officials, simply because the state-wide people had all the contacts made already. I think of the Group-W correspondent in Harrisburg, a man named Sandy Steraphant, who was talking to the civil defense people long before the national media had even thought to go to them.

INT: So you felt their sources were better?

NAR: At first. Now once the NRC came in, and especially after the arrival of the President, that changed, I think.

INT: Okay, that was the next question I was going to ask. How did you feel about government officials' handling of the incident?

NAR: Well, I don't think there was any need for the President to show up, that I saw as blatantly political. The state administration, I think did a good job, *once* they got going. I mean, it took them a bit too long to become involved, but again, that's partly blamed on Met-Ed. The local, here in town, CD people, were from what I saw just fantastic, as were most of the planning people that were going on... most of the planning that was being

done in and around Harrisburg, Middletown. The NRC didn't fair as well, it seemed, they couldn't get their act together. We were getting conflicting reports between Middletown and Washington, and until Denton took over, there didn't seem to be any real idea as to who was to make the public statements. It was pretty much anybody's ballgame.

INT: How did you feel about Metropolitan Edison? Well not them totally, but I mean in terms of the way they handled this particular...

NAR: It was understandable, and yet deplorable. Of course, they're going to – to minimize it as much as they possibly can, but at the same time, I think they minimized it too long, and they were too slow to recognize the facts, and what the facts were doing to people in and around that area, and I think ultimately that hurt them more than the accident itself.

INT: In what way?

NAR: Well, not ultimately in the sense of the investigations that are still going on, but ultimately in terms of people's opinion, say within a week to two weeks of the accident. Met Ed came off as the villains, which I think their own actions put them there, in that position.

INT: Did you find anyone in the whole business more reliable than anyone else, was there anybody whose word you trusted more than other people's?

NAR: I'd say Denton. Denton and before him... the governor. Although I can't put a finger on why.

INT: Why the governor you mean?

NAR: Why the governor.

INT: Can you put a finger on why Denton?

NAR: Denton was the man who took charge. He was the take-charge figure. Everybody was subservient to Denton, there was no feeling of, anybody else had any say in the matter. Met Ed people were working with the NRC, the NRC was being – at the site, was being headed by Denton. Supposedly Denton knew everything that was going on.

INT: Is there anybody you particularly mistrusted?

NAR: I'd have to say, the first day, the first two days, Met Ed, after that NRC Washington. I felt they should have kept out of it.

INT: Did you feel that those in charge were in control of the situation?

NAR: No.

INT: What made you uneasy?

NAR: The fact that none of this had ever happened before, and had never even been tested for happening. There was... They were never in control.

INT: And that remains your opinion now?

NAR: Umm-hmm. Yes.

INT: Are they in control now?

NAR: They're in control of that one reactor. They're in control of the nuclear program as such, but in any one reactor, what's to prevent it from happening again?

INT: What worried you most about this situation?

NAR: You mean what event, what possibility?

INT: What seemed to provoke your worry more? You said that second release is when you began in the course of events to feel more concerned. Is there anything you can put your finger on that worried you most about...?

NAR: Probably the development of the hydrogen bubble. Simply because of what was being said. "Well, if it *does* explode, the concrete wall *should* hold it, *but...*" [INT laughs.] That doesn't really do much for one's confidence.

INT: Did you make any plans different from what you would ordinarily have made?

NAR: After classes were suspended, I did plan to go home. But I think I was different in that regard in that I wanted to stay around until I wasn't needed here, at the station that is, before I left.

INT: Okay, then you felt some sort of responsibility here.

NAR: Yes.

INT: Can you talk about that a little bit?

NAR: After Friday at the station, there were only a handful of people left, most of the staff had taken off. And I had been doing, up from Wednesday till Friday, very brief news reports whenever I could, in between classes and that sort of thing. And then after Friday, when we had the first in the series of information meetings, it was down to two or three of us making all the arrangements, taking care of details to keep the station on the

air. We were on the air twenty-four hours a day for nearly an entire week. And somebody had to do it.

INT: Why did they? I'm going to the second level of the felt responsibility.

NAR: Well, I think part of it was a desire to prove the station's merit. I don't know how relevant this is, but a lot of people on campus see the station, the student station, as sort of a – a convenient toy, and I think there was a determination on the part of the people that were left to prove that this wasn't necessarily the case. That it could serve – that it could provide a useful service.

INT: Okay. So there was some sort of code of behavior operating in relation to the radio station. I mean some sort of ideal.

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Can you talk about what that is?

NAR: Part of the charter of the station is to provide information on topics relevant to the campus community, or some odd such phrase like that. And if ever there was something relevant, it was TMI. And we were smack in the middle of it. We were, for awhile, probably the best source of information for people who weren't coming to the meetings. We also were posting photocopies of wire service reports for the administration, for the people manning the phones at Student Services, we had our own bulletin board, we were posting that sort of things, and that was all to provide a public service.

INT: Did you change any of your ordinary routines.

NAR: *[laughing]* Umm-hmm. Meals were a lot more hurried, sleep was a lot less plentiful. I don't know, between Wednesday and Friday, I think I made all my classes, but Friday I think I punted completely, and spent most of my time thereafter at the station.

INT: You said you thought about leaving, and I think you've said that why you stayed was because of service to the radio station. Were there other reasons that you stayed?

NAR: I think part of it was that I felt I'd get more information here, or rather, there would be fewer middlemen in information. And after say Friday – well Friday or Saturday, it didn't really seem that there was a lot of danger. Even though the hydrogen bubble was there and nobody knew what was going on, we were still 25 miles away.

INT: When you thought about leaving, did you think about what you might want to take with you?

NAR: Just clothes and things, bare necessities.

INT: Was there someone in your own life that you were watching in order to decide what you would do?

NAR: Can you explain that?

INT: Well, was there someone in the immediate, you know, like a roommate, or a parent, or...?

NAR: I don't think so. My roommate took off as soon as it happened. My parents said basically, "Do what you think is best, but if it's – if you think it's dangerous, come home."

INT: So you did talk it over with them?

NAR: Right. I called home I think Saturday.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of what was happening at TMI or what might happen?

NAR: I think everybody did.

INT: Can you tell me about them?

NAR: I couldn't – Somehow I couldn't really envision a nuclear explosion, or a gas explosion. About the only thing I saw was mass evacuation. Even though the pregnant women and children were evacuated, I could still see, I could still visualize a mass evacuation of the five-mile radius.

INT: What did that look like to you?

NAR: Confusion. I had visions of ambulances and fire engines screaming up and down 81 and the turnpike, that sort of thing. At one point I could see cots filling up the social hall of the Union Building, the gymnasium, that sort of thing. That was probably the only thing I thought about in terms of visualization.

INT: Did you think that any aspects of your health might have been affected by TMI?

NAR: Who knows? The stress didn't do me any good, I know that much. I doubt that there was enough radiation released to seriously affect my health that adversely in the future. I haven't checked all the latest figures, although it didn't seem like there was anything really to worry about, although you never know.

INT: Were you concerned the food or the milk from the area?

NAR: The milk yes, probably because of the Chinese test three years ago; headlines were full of "Radioactive milk" *then*; I think I cut down on –

INT: Cut down on drinking it?

NAR: For a few days. A week or so maybe

INT: If the worst had occurred over there, what do you think might have happened?

NAR: Well, the *absolute* worst would have been a meltdown, and had that occurred... we wouldn't be sitting here to talk about it.

INT: Why?

NAR: Because I don't think anybody would have come back. Or at least – I don't think anybody, say east of Carlisle or west of say Lancaster would still be there. I think had a meltdown occurred, even a minor one, we would see, say a fifteen-mile radius deserted, fifteen to twenty miles.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of the effects of radiation?

NAR: Not really. I don't think anybody that I came across gave serious consideration to that. There were flipper baby jokes, that sort of thing, but I don't think anybody really thought about deformed children, outside of joking around. A friend of mine put up on his note board "Deformed kids are bogus," and maybe that's an indication that there was fear, but I don't think that I thought about it.

INT: Did you think about your own death?

NAR: No, I can't recall thinking about it.

INT: Did you think you would survive?

NAR: Oh, I thought I would survive the worst, simply because I was so far out and had a bit of time to get away if it happened. Again, a meltdown, or a hydrogen gas explosion damaging the walls probably would, almost definitely affect health adversely to some degree, but I don't really think I thought about it much.

INT: Did you think about God during the incident?

NAR: I wouldn't say so.

INT: Did you pray?

NAR: No, I'm not by nature a very religious person.



INT: You said that you had felt responsibility to the radio station and that sort of thing and that you had also considered leaving. Did you feel real conflict between those things?

NAR: Until, say, Tuesday or Wednesday, yes. Then, when the reports were issued that the gas bubble had somehow shrunk tremendously, it seemed to me that, quote-unquote, “the worst was over”, and that immediate danger of meltdown had passed. At that point I felt better about leaving.

INT: Do you feel that your work was affected by TMI? I know you said that you didn’t go to classes Friday. Was your work in general affected by TMI?

NAR: Oh yes.

INT: How was it affected?

NAR: I just didn’t put the time into it. I was too busy down at the station, too busy talking to other people about it. It seemed to pale in comparison.

INT: You have already described that you had things to do otherwise, other than what you would ordinarily do. *[pauses]* Actually we’ve got answered to a lot of these questions, I’m just checking now... At the time, did the event bring to mind any past experiences of yours?

NAR: Well, the only thing would be the Johnstown flood of ‘77.

INT: Why did you think of the flood?

NAR: Well, I was... I was out in the middle of that, driving home one night, and... I had a brother who was stuck in Johnstown that evening and got out *just* in time... He was telling us stories of being *alone* on a four-lane highway, except for fire engines and ambulances. That’s the only immediate experience I thought about, and I think I thought about the differences between the two.

INT: What were they?

NAR: Oh, the flood was tangible, we could *see* the gravel across the road that... we could see our neighbor’s basements being pumped out by the fire department, we could see the damage that was done, lines and trees and that sort of thing, down. *[Pauses.]* And we could *clean that up*. But TMI was intangible. It was nothing you could touch, nothing you could see. Even pictures of the plant itself didn’t look any different that any other time. There was nothing *to see*. ...Nothing of the disaster, of the accident. We could see the reactions to it. We could see lead bricks being flown into Harrisburg airport. We could see media trucks everywhere, but... You couldn’t see the damage.

INT: Do you think that this is more or less frightening than say the flood, or a hurricane?

NAR: I'd say that this is more frightening.

INT: Because of that?

NAR: Because it was so intangible. There was nothing to touch, nothing... Nothing to move, nothing to... You know, you couldn't shovel it away. It was there. And yet at the same time it wasn't.

INT: Did you think of any past events, say historical events, or any such parallels at the time?

NAR: No, I wouldn't say – I'm not that well-informed about other accidents. Later on, maybe Love Canal. That would probably be about it.

INT: Why do you think you made that connection?

NAR: Well, there's a connection between... I can't even recall who, but supposedly, I think it was you in fact, told me that one of the professors here had grown up in Love Canal and didn't return here. Also I thought about chemical accidents and the resulting birth defects, illnesses, that sort of thing.

INT: Did any TV shows or movies come to mind, or books or stories, any kind of fictions?

NAR: Two books, both of which dealt with nuclear disasters. *Failsafe*, and a book called *Alas, Babylon!*. Neither of them had anything to do with this sort of an accident, they both were nuclear war, that sort of thing. But they came to mind, simply, I would imagine, because of the nuclear connection.

INT: Did you find yourself singing any songs?

NAR: Now or then?

INT: Then.

NAR: Not really, nothing came to mind.

INT: Did you have any daydreams that you remember?

NAR: Outside of thinking about an evacuation and what our role as a college or as students would be in it, not really. I thought about... I thought about friends and how we would deal with it. That was about it.

INT: About friends?

NAR: How – I thought about – I'd say I thought, not daydreamed, about how my friends were reacting, were leaving or staying, or urging me to stay, or urging me to leave, that sort of thing

INT: How did you feel about their decisions?

NAR: One person in particular I thought was being silly. The way she was behaving.

INT: And that was?

NAR: And that was urging me to leave, just for the sake of getting out – “You can't tell what's going to happen, you may as well leave.” Other friends left because, “Hey it's a good time,” you know – “Let's get out of here.” After almost three years, the place loses its appeal. You like to get away for a while. So they would leave for a week and come back. No harm done, no time really lost.

INT: Did you have any sleeping dreams that you remember at the time?

NAR: I don't even remember much sleep [*Laughs.*] No, I don't recall dreams outside of the ordinary.

INT: You said that your sleep was disrupted by major activities going on, was it disturbed when you actually got sleep?

NAR: I wouldn't say so, no.

INT: Do you think that this event changed—you've said that it changed behavior in people around you, you had certain attitudes toward that. Do you think it changed them in any lasting way?

NAR: I don't know. There are people who are now more vocal in their opposition to nuclear power, people are a lot easier to talk about it now. A lot quicker to talk about it around here. [*Pause.*] Other than that, I don't really... I can't really come up with anything that I would say was a new personality trait for somebody.

INT: Did it change you in any lasting way?

NAR: Maybe made me a little bit readier to take a more critical look at what was going on, rather than just accept what was being said.

INT: Did you see any jokes about radiation or Three Mile Island around?

NAR: [*Laughs.*] Is the Pope Catholic?

INT: Can you remember any?

NAR: Oh, one night at the station, our news director and several of his fraternity brothers were in our production room – fooling around, is the best way to describe it, making up spot ads for flipper babies, and how to prevent them... There were flipper babies drawn, there were graffiti in the restrooms... there were jokes everywhere.

INT: Why do you think flipper babies?

NAR: Well they're the uncertainty as to what would happen – to unborn children, to *our* children.

INT: What's the image there though, I mean, can you – can you trace it to anything?

NAR: Unless it would be the same sorts of things from Love Canal and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the deformed people born... radiation-induced birth defects, that sort of thing. People just, I think people didn't really know what to think, whether they had been dosed enough or not, and so decided to joke about it. There was nothing really else that they could do, because nobody had any answers for them.

INT: Did you laugh?

NAR: [*Laughs.*] Yes – yeah, I'd have to say so, yeah.

INT: Did others laugh?

NAR: Yeah, it was... The attitude, especially toward that sort of thing that was going on then was, "You guys are sick. You really are sick," but at the same time everybody was doing it, and everybody was laughing. I was going around myself making jokes about hens at Three Mile Island laying fried eggs. It really seemed like the only thing that you could do. And I know that there have been jokes that still go on now. Two or three, I think a week or so later, Johnny Carson had some *hysterical* humor, he'd come on to tremendous applause and said thank you, thank you very much, but I really have trouble accepting this applause, we just found out our applause sign was manufactured by Met Ed. [*INT laughing.*] There's a poster up at the place where I work, advertising a small island in the Susquehanna River for sale, ideal for fishing, this sort of thing.

INT: Which, is this, you mean at the radio, or...?

NAR: At the telephone company, where I work now.

INT: Oh, at the telephone company, now!

NAR: "Buildings on the island, two smoke stacks, a large number of cylindrical cooling towers, ideal for drying fish..." [*INT laughing.*] This sort of thing. But the humor was... it was, everybody could do it, it was something that, no matter how much you knew about the events, how much you knew about what was going on, how involved you were, you could still joke about it, you could still laugh about it.

INT: Why? Why do you think there was so much joking?

NAR: To relieve tension maybe. I think most people rejected the idea of crying and breaking down in tears, hysterics, especially after the spectacle at the first meeting, the first public meeting at school. Most people weren't going to do that, it wasn't the right way to handle it. So you could either express concern, or you could joke about it, you could laugh about it, try to – not forget it, but just take not as seriously as everybody else was. It got to be tiring after a while. Tremendous worry, continuous worrying about it. You had to have some kind of relief from it, I think that's what most people looked for.

INT: The thing at work- do you suppose you can get us a copy of it?

NAR: I'll try. I'll see if I can get you one.

INT: Have you developed an opinion about nuclear energy?

NAR: More modification than earlier. I still think that it's necessary, but I also feel that it has to be cleaned up. A lot. It's not safe as it stands now. And that there needs to be much, much tighter supervision and control. But I still think it – I still think it's a viable energy source, it just needs to be closely, very closely supervised and controlled.

INT: Is there anything else?

NAR: I don't really know what else to say, it's something that – At one point it *seems* to be over, at another point, who knows, you know, twenty years, thirty years, God knows what's going to happen.

INT: You mean in terms of long term health effects?

NAR: Right. Right.