

Date: 1979

Occupation: Managing Editor

INTERVIEWER: When did you first hear about the Three Mile Island incident and from whom?

NARRATOR: I guess it was the day it happened. That Wednesday, I believe, was the day they realized there was a problem. We heard about it from United Press International here in the newsroom. They ran a bulletin on the wire kind of late in our morning production site. We got something little on page 1 that day. So I guess the first time I heard was the morning that it was released. Probably a little bit before most people heard.

INT: Did you think it was serious then?

NAR: No, not really. We thought it was an interesting story and we thought that it was significant, but we didn't think it was serious.

INT: How did you feel about the way the others handled it around here? What are the reactions of the other people?

NAR: Here at the Sentinel? The news department there was some interest. Aw, there's been a radiation leak at Three Mile Island and some people were saying bad things about Met Ed but beyond the news department it didn't seem to be at that time to be too much of a reaction from anybody.

INT: Did you know that the reactor was there before the incident happened?

NAR: Yes.

INT: How do you think the media handled the situation?

NAR: Well, it varied. Our biggest concern, as far as the Sentinel goes, was dealing with conflicting reports. United Press International which to some extent was our only source of information at the beginning of this would often contradict itself as stories were updated throughout the day. First we had the story on Wednesday saying that there had been a release and Thursday's paper if you look at that—I probably should have reviewed these before I came in here—but the Thursday paper would probably show there didn't seem to be too much of a problem. I think there might have been something on the front page about Three Mile Island but not much. Everybody was saying, well, it's over. There's no more trouble there, and we might have had a recap type story but no great coverage. Friday morning was when it seemed that it was a lot more serious than everybody thought.

INT: That was the second leak, right?

NAR: Yeah, that was the second leak and that was when Thornburgh ordered the evacuation. That's when I think we at the Sentinel became convinced that it was a fairly serious problem. We had sent a reporter to cover the Thursday press conference that Met Ed had and the guy said that there had been a release but nothing serious. Everybody can go home. No big problem. Okay, if the guy says there is no problem, then there is no problem. The next day it turned out the guy was lying. There was a very serious problem. The problem was being covered up.

INT: Do you think he was lying or do you think he really didn't know?

NAR: I firmly believe that the public was misinformed by company officials, and to some extent by NRC officials, at almost every available opportunity, especially Met Ed. It's obvious, because the guy had said on Thursday that there's not too much to worry about and on Friday everybody in the area was thrown into a panic. I was working... I was not managing editor then, but I was filling in for the managing editor who was taking the day off. See, that was our assessment of the situation. He was taking the day off to cut his grass or something and he was at home. We were not convinced that, I don't think anyone else was convinced either, there was a serious problem on Friday. And Friday-- Thursday we sent a guy up there to the press conference and pattered around Middletown and talked to some people on the way back and he wrote a couple feature stories. He wrote a story about a woman who had some cows that died and she thought that it was part of the plant, and he interviewed some people in Middletown to see how they felt about it and I had laid out the front page and I think I put one of those on the front page and couple of other stories, unrelated stories, the dollar might have been doing something in German, nothing like TMI. Then just about as we were ready to go to press, the second was made public about the latest leaks and the fact the releases were pretty much continuing and the governor's story. And quick I redid the front page and changed things around considerably and then just stood there watching the wire machine for new information to come in. We did not have a reporter over there at the time. We sent one immediately but while he was on his way, things were happening so we turned on a radio in the newsroom. We were writing stories right off the radio. The governor was talking and we were taking notes and writing stories. That's pretty much how we did Friday's paper. Saturday, well, Friday afternoon was when they started talking about a melt-down at 3-4 o'clock in the afternoon a story came over the wire that they didn't even ring any bells for. I mean even UPI at this point I don't think was convinced it was a real serious problem. They were probably thinking it was a good news story and that was it.

INT: I thought this was Saturday?

NAR: No, this was on Friday. Friday afternoon. They ring bells on the wire machine when they think a story is important. They ring a bell so you'll go over and look at it. I don't think they rang a bell or anything. Some reporter in Washington interviewed some scientist with the NRC who said well, yeah, there's a possibility we could have a melt-down. I had just seen the China Syndrome about 3 days before the Wednesday of the

radiation release so.... It all seemed kind of surreal to me. I knew what a melt-down was and I think we might have even made some jokes about the China Syndrome while we were putting out the papers. A couple other people in the newsroom had seen it and we thought well, you know, this could be serious and then they moved the story about the melt-down possibility. It stopped being serious, it started to be kind of crazy, and then somebody denied it and then two other scientists said yes there's a chance and then somebody denied it and it finally came to where Friday night we were caught sitting around the TV set watching Walter Cronkite to find out what was really going on. We didn't believe UPI anymore. They ran, one of the TV stations locally, ran some erroneous information that scared the hell out of people. Apparently they got it from AP. UPI was still contradicting itself to some extent. We had assigned 2 or 3 reporters to it permanently and told everybody we hoped they wouldn't leave town over the weekend. This was when everybody was thinking about going to Oregon or something. We asked our staff not to leave, in case something happened and in Saturday's paper we were trying to be as calm as we could be, in, you know, presenting the information the best way we could without causing a lot of unnecessary stress. I guess it might be better to say a lot of unnecessary panic. It was stressful for everybody and a lot of people panicked. We had a Dickinson intern who was working with us. He left. He was back in New Jersey. I think he used it as an excuse to go visit his parents, but we had assigned 2 or 3 reporters to it then and a couple of others were ready to work on it and by the next week, by Monday, the entire staff was working on almost nothing but Three Mile Island. So that's how this medium handled it. The other media, I think some of them did a better job than others. The York paper did an excellent job with it. They had even just finished running a series you might have heard of on Three Mile Island the week before the accident and it was a series on whether there could be an accident at Three Mile Island and then there was one. I think the series concluded, yes, there could be and then there was an accident. The Harrisburg paper I think did a creditable job. I don't see how they could have done much more than they did but they did omit a lot of things. I think the coverage of this area by all the media except the Sentinel was less than it could have been. I was kind of appalled at the Columbia Journalism Review which is a trade publication put out by Columbia School of Journalism. I was kind of appalled at the glowing reports of how the local media covered Three Mile Island. It didn't mention the Sentinel at all. It talked about how great a job the Patriot did and some of the TV stations but it seemed to me that there wasn't enough information about Cumberland County for as big a media market that Cumberland County is. There was not enough information about Cumberland County in the publications other than the Sentinel. And some papers got a little panicky. I don't think the Patriot did, except on Saturday. The first Saturday they ran a map that showed areas that might or might not be evacuated. Apparently no decision had been made at that time at all and we were in one of the areas that might have been evacuated. It turned out that that really wasn't true and the map wasn't accurate, etc. etc. That's the only bad thing I think the Patriot did... Long answer to a short question.

INT: How do you think the government officials handled it?

NAR: Thornburgh I think was acting in the dark and I think he has said this himself. I felt really reassured that Friday night when I saw Thornburgh on television. I wish he

could have held his press conference on time. Friday night, after the Friday night that everything happened while they were waiting for it to melt-down, Thornburgh was going to have a press conference and it kept getting delayed and delayed and delayed. I was sitting in front of the TV set waiting for it to come on and I thought it must be an emergency that's keeping him. What the hell was going on? If it were something simple, he would have had this on time. But I think he did all right. The tapes from the NRC deliberations were released sometime after the event. – 3 or 4 weeks later. It seems to me they didn't handle it very well, at all. I think as the story unfolds and all these commissions and study groups who have been looking at Three Mile Island for the last 6 months and til they make their reports, I think we will all learn just how bad a job our public officials did during the crisis. I think it was a pretty bad job. They were talking about calling up the National Guard. Well, the National Guards would have been evacuated as private citizens so they could not be called up. And things like this. Just a big lack of coordination. And I think everybody learned a lot from it. If there is a next time, it might be handled better.

INT: How do you think Met Ed handled the situation?

NAR: I think Met Ed demonstrated nothing but incompetence and deceit and disregard for the public and customers throughout the incident. The best thing they did was put Denton in charge. I think they did that so that they could avoid having to answer tough questions they expected to be asked. My personal feeling is that Met Ed should be closed down by government order and merged into another utility company. Short of that, I'd be delighted to see the president resign. I'm delighted further that they are using money, as a citizen, as a customer of theirs which I am I wish them nothing but financial success because we are starting to feel it on electric bills, but I think Met Ed botched it. I think the problems can be traced back to lack of supervision and a lack of control on their part and the NRC wasn't doing its job as watchdog etc cetera, et cetera. I don't have a very high opinion of Met Ed.

INT: Do you think that those in charge were in control of the situation?

NAR: No. The reactor was in control of the situation. Everybody else was reacting to the reactor. I don't think any person was ever in control of the situation at any time. Thornburgh advised people to evacuate in certain circumstances but I don't think anybody was really in control of the situation.

INT: Do you think they're in control of it now?

NAR: More so. But I think the jury might even be out on that. They seem now to know they've got the technology to clean up the plant which is their next big step, to clean up the plant without blowing it up without contaminating the Susquehanna. I think even that remains to be seen whether they can pull it off without screwing it up. I think they will be a lot more careful now than they were while the plant was still running.

INT: Did you change your plants at all? From your everyday routine?

NAR: Not really. I don't know if we would have gone out of town that weekend or not. I doubt it. I'm a Little League coach and that Saturday we had practice as scheduled. My wife and I discussed the possibility of her leaving town if it looked like it would get serious. But we never made any definite plans. The thought of leaving town never occurred to me personally. I figured I'd be one of the last ones.

INT: Because of your job?

NAR: Yeah, because of my job. So one of the reporters sent his wife and kid out of town and I think... None of the others were married... (unintelligible) We didn't really change our plans we planned not to make any except those contingent on what was going on. But we didn't change, we probably would have stayed in town that weekend and we probably wouldn't have done anything for the next week or so. We didn't go to the west shore for anything. We didn't go shopping in Camp Hill or Harrisburg East Mall or anything.

INT: If you had left what would you have taken with you?

NAR: That's an interesting question. Probably... I was reading some stories UPI did on people in Middletown. They would have been asked to leave perhaps and maybe never come back and you wonder what would you take. We would have taken our car and probably would have taken as much as we could get into it, if we thought it was going to blow up and we might not ever be able to come back. But we really hadn't talked about what we would take. We would have taken most of our clothes I suppose. We would have taken as much money as we could get out of the bank and all of our credit cards and probably would have taken our cats, but beyond that, I don't know. We'd have left the TV set and some things you just couldn't have taken. Like what do you do with your bed. You can't just stick that in your Volkswagen. I imagine if it would have come to evacuation, all of the U-Haul trucks would have been spoken for so we probably wouldn't have been able to rent a truck and carry things away and move out of our house. That would have been silly anyway. We would have probably taken any heirlooms we may have had and things that we didn't think we could live without. Mostly just packing up for a long weekend and hoping for the best.

INT: Was there anyone who you particularly trusted?

NAR: I trusted the reporters that we had up there.

INT: The ones from this paper.

NAR: The ones from this paper and we deferred to them in every case where there was a dispute and because of that we did not publish once anything that was inaccurate out of that whole incident, there was not one error in the Sentinel except for typographical mistakes and if we had a story that said A from UPI and B from our reporter down there, we'd go with the reporter. We'd tell him about the UPI so that he could check it out and

in every case we were right and I trusted them personally as well to keep me informed. as well as trusting the copy that they wrote for the paper.

INT: Was there anyone you were watching in order to determine what you would do?

NAR: You mean like if Tom moves, I'll move, or something like that?

INT: Yes.

NAR: No. We would have decided ourselves. I guess I was watching the publisher of the paper to some extent. If he had thought it was serious enough to close down then operation and advise all the staff to leave, I would have probably left because there wouldn't have been any reason for me to stay anyway. But as long as the paper was open, I would have been here at work even if I would have sent my family away.

INT: Do you think anything that happened at TMI might have affected your health? Either now or in the future?

NAR: No. The wind was blowing from the west. Priscilla Laws said that we hardly got any radiation. I don't feel there were any effects on me personally.

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

NAR: Yeah, as a matter of fact we were. We stopped buying milk until they said it was safe. We stopped buying milk, we stopped buying ice cream, we stopped buying eggs. We did buy some powdered milk at one point. I never had powdered milk before. We did buy some powdered milk for a few weeks. But when the tests finally started coming in and everyone said, okay there's nothing in it, we started buying milk again. That was a big sacrifice because we enjoy our milk.

INT: Did you have any mental pictures of what was going on at Three Mile Island?

NAR: No, I could see the pictures. We were getting photographs and I guess that put me apart or put people at the Sentinel apart from a lot of other people. We were getting pictures over the wire all the time so we didn't have to conjure up any images of what was going on, we could see, see what was going on most of the time. We had TV sets going here and radios on and I had seen the movie and everybody said it was just like Jane Fonda's set and I never really thought much about how it might look. I never imagined anything.

INT: If the worst had happened at Three Mile Island, what do you think would have happened?

NAR: What would be the worst? There is just a story that came over the UPI today. If the worst had happened according to two Princeton researchers, thousands of people would have died of cancer in the next 20 -30 years. It could have been worse than that. I

don't know if it could have actually blown up. I'd say the worst that probably would have happened would have been that in addition to any cancers or any latent physical problems, this part of Pennsylvania might have been just a wasteland for a decade or two.

INT: Do any effects of radiation come to mind?

NAR: You mean that might have occurred here? Or have occurred?

INT: That might have.

NAR: That might have occurred? Oh...

INT: Or have, either one.

NAR: I haven't seen anything that has occurred. I don't think there has been any effects around here that would be observable. There were some people in Harrisburg who claim their cattle might have died. I'm sure that every abnormal baby that is born within the next 5 years to parents who lived here during the crisis will be a wonder if it might have had something to do with the crisis. Whether it did or not. I think. I don't think there are any observable physical effects. There are some observable economic effects. Dickinson people made a lot of money on T-shirts. Some Middletown people made a lot of money on T-shirts. People who cater to Middletown tourists made a lot of money this summer. The real estate market around the plant might be a little bit depressed, but it seems to be a little depressed everywhere so its hard to tell whether that would be caused by the accident or not. I think the effects that could have been – it's hard to say. You read On the Beach by Neville Shostak, A Last Babylon, I forget who wrote that, or some of the other books that came out in the late 50's and early 60's when everybody was worried about the bomb, Level 7 and some of these others and you think, gee whiz, the trees would have all been blown away and the ground would have been scorched and some people may think that none of that would have been happening. The trees might be purple and the cats will get 3 heads. It's hard to speculate on what physical effects there might have been. If the plant had blown up, I imagine everything between Camp Hill and Lancaster would probably be empty right now except for some wild creatures running around and that probably would be the worst that would have happened.

INT: Did you think about God during the incident?

NAR: I don't remember thinking about God so I guess I didn't.

INT: Did you think about death? Your own?

NAR: No.

INT: What was some of the jokes that you heard?

NAR: We were writing them in here. I can't remember, I knew you were going to ask me that question. I was trying to think of some. I probably heard at one time or another just about any joke that you have mentioned. We even did a story on jokes and I can't remember one of them now. They were all tension relievers. They were all hilarious.

INT: Did you laugh at them?

NAR: And I laughed at every one of them.

INT: Were there baby jokes?

NAR: Flipper jokes, you name it. They were all in the worst taste and they were all probably adapted from something else. I doubt that there was one original joke to come out of the whole incident. Probably all Polish jokes or flipper jokes. There were flipper jokes before the accident. But they seemed to surface for this. I can't remember one joke. That's terrible. I guess it would have to happen again for me to remember some.

INT: I don't remember any either. I know there were a lot going around.

NAR: There were a lot of jokes and we laughed our heads off. They were all funny. They weren't funny on Friday night. I remember they were funny before Friday night and they were funny as hell the next week, but that Friday night I remember somebody uttered a joke and I felt offended. I guess that was the most concerned I was waiting for Thornburgh to come on TV and I was a little wary about going to bed. We had a friend in Carlisle, this is where I let the conversation drift, two friends in Carlisle. We picked up one of the friends and took her over to another friend's house and we all watched TV and when the TV was over the friend we had picked up who had sent her children up to Connecticut to get them out of town, the friend we had picked up did not want to go home by herself because she didn't know what would happen. We live between here and Three Mile Island. We live in Boiling Springs and she felt more comfortable going toward Three Mile Island so that she could have some company for the night than she would have felt staying home 10 miles farther away by herself, so she came home with us and spent the evening in the guest room. That was the only night I was really a little bit concerned.

INT: That's so interesting because of her wanting to come on Friday night.

NAR: That was the worst night. After Friday night everything seemed to be getting better.

INT: Did you sing any special songs?

NAR: Might have as part of a joke, but nothing I can think of. Glow little glow worm maybe. I think that was a parody. There were a few others. There are some jokers in the office. I was probably the worst one but there were a few others besides me... (End of Side A)



(Beginning of Side B)

NAR: I think we got a picture of the Siamese twins. The two girls who were joined together at the tops of their heads right around the time that this occurred and somebody wrote a caption for that picture somehow blaming it on Three Mile Island. Like “Look what was born in Harrisburg Hospital yesterday” or Middleton General or something like that. For a while after that if we would see a picture of the 87 pound pumpkin that some farmer carts around in his pick-up truck every fall or something we’d say look what grew on Three Mile Island and people would hang them up on the board and we’d all joke about it. But after about a month it pretty much dissipated.

INT: Did you have any daydreams?

NAR: No.

INT: Any sleeping dreams?

NAR: No, which is funny. I never, I was telling my wife about that once. I think it was in connection with one of the stories that UPI did or we did on you guys or something. I moved to Louisville, Kentucky in 1974 about a month after the tornado had just devastated portions of Louisville, Kentucky. I never saw the tornado. I’ve never seen any tornado personally and the closet I’ve been to it is driving around Louisville and neighborhoods that were hit by the tornado and hit pretty damn hard. You’d see houses where the front would be ripped off and you could look inside like in a doll house. Everything else would be pretty much intact. You could go up in an airplane and you could just see where the tornado went this way and houses next door weren’t touched and the houses my wife and I lived in for about a year had been very seriously damaged by the tornado. But the house across the street and another house like 6 doors up it had destroyed. And ours hadn’t been knocked down even. It had been kind of twisted but not knocked down. And other houses you could see piles of bricks and everything else would be gone. And somehow that affected me enough so that for about 2 years and even after we moved away from Louisville and especially in the spring, I would have dreams about tornados and some of them would be awful, awful dreams where I’d be running down the street and the tornado would be right behind me and you’d jump in the car and turn the key and the car won’t start and you look in the mirror and there’s this funnel cloud coming down the street. “Goddammit, why won’t the car move?” And you get out of the car and start running and you jump under a bush and you look up and see the houses explode – really vivid. Awful nightmares. Once or twice I might have woken up and shouted something. I’ve never seen a tornado. It was insane. It really was. But Three Mile Island has not had the slightest effect on me. I have not daydreamed about it. I have not night-dreamed about it. I’ve not had nightmares. I guess working here maybe and all those awful jokes were kind of a catharsis and any anxiety that might have had a chance to build up was let out. Whereas the tornado, not being really a part of it but experiencing a lot of the aftereffects of it might have, and being affected by the tornado

as I was because I really didn't have an outlet for any tensions that were building up or any anxieties that were building up on account of it. Do you see what I mean?

INT: Mmhm.

NAR: Three Mile Island was just...

INT: Then your sleep wasn't disturbed at all?

NAR: I had a little trouble getting to sleep that Friday, you know, thinking about is this the night it blows up and we wake up in the morning and find out that the Atlantic Ocean is pounding on the edge of the house or something, but after that Friday night I never had any trouble sleeping. The cars coming down the street have deprived me of more sleep than Three Mile Island.

INT: Did you think that TMI was more frightening than natural disasters like a flood or hurricane?

NAR: I don't know. I've been in floods and I've been in hurricanes and they're all kinda frightening. I'd say the scariest thing I've ever been in is a hurricane, because it's just relentless. Probably the scariest thing about Three Mile Island was that it seemed so much out of control of anybody that there was nothing much you can do. If it's flooding and you know about it. You're sitting there well, look its flooding and I'm okay, I can run up this hill. Or if it's a hurricane you can go to the basement. In Louisville every spring they'd tell you what to do if a tornado came. Go into the northeast corner of your basement and get down like this. If your house blows away, you'll be okay. And there were things you could do about this. But if one of those technicians had dropped his wrench while he was tightening up X valve to get rid of the bubble and the thing had blown up there's nothing that we could have done. We couldn't have hidden in the basement. We couldn't have run up on top of a hill and we couldn't have closed the windows. It wouldn't have made any difference at all, especially if the wind was blowing from the east. So in that way I guess it was scary because you were powerless to deal with it. That was probably the scariest thing about it, there was no control. It's like your car skidding on ice. No matter how much you want your car not to skid, it's gonna skid until it stops and it might stop up against a tree. And Three Mile Island was a lot like that. You didn't know if it would stop skidding before it blew up or not. But I'd say it wasn't as scary as some other situations that I've been in.

INT: Have you developed an opinion about nuclear energy?

NAR: My opinion about nuclear energy has not changed since Three Mile Island. I think nuclear energy is vital. We cannot face a winter when oil is approaching a dollar a gallon and on the verge of running out and say that we do not need nuclear power. I think that nuclear power has got to have a place in the future energy plans of the world. Regardless of the dangers. There are probably more coal miners who died of black lung and more people who have died in collapses of coal mine shafts and more people who

have died in oil well accidents than there ever will die in a nuclear plant accident. You just can't say nuclear power is inherently unsafe. It's more dramatic. If TMI had blown up there might have been more people killed in one fell swoop than were ever killed at one time. But I bet if you add up all the coal mining accidents, all the oil rig accidents and even the people who have killed themselves chopping wood it probably would come to more people than would have died at the Three Mile Island meltdown so I think the arguments about it being unsafe are valid to an extent but only valid in so far as we are not controlling it properly. People don't need to die in coal mine collapses either, but it doesn't get nearly the publicity. Miners don't need to die from black lung, but it doesn't get the publicity. It's not as dramatic. Two miners die thirty years later and very slowly from black lung, but die all at once from TMI melt-down and I think that's the difference. People like Jane Fonda. I think Jane Fonda is a great actress and I wish she'd stick to acting. I don't see how any responsible person can say we should close down nuclear power plants. Because even Jane Fonda turns that switch on and expects those lights to come on. If we get rid of all the nuclear power plants, there will be a day when the lights won't come on.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

NAR: No, not a thing.