

Date: June 22, 1979

Occupation: Coordinator of the Municipal Services for Cumberland County

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember when you first heard about the Three Mile Island incident?

NARRATOR: Yeah, right after it happened. By radio. I was down in the... see I'm in the emergency preparedness office. I mean, that's where my desk is. And I heard it immediately, as soon as it was announced. That would be Wednesday afternoon.

INT: Was that... that wasn't public radio broadcast, or was it?

NAR: It was.

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

NAR: Oh, yes. I worked for Pennsylvania Power and Light Company for 45 years, so... and we have plants just 3 miles away - Brunner Island.

INT: A nuclear plant?

NAR: No, no - it's coal fire.

INT: How far is TMI from us?

NAR: About 25 miles.

INT: You would have known that before?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: When you first heard about it, did you think it was serious, or how did you react to it?

NAR: I didn't particularly think it was serious. No. They've had problems before with these nuclear plants, and naturally we didn't have any details.

INT: Just getting the bare minimum?

NAR: Right. And unfortunately we didn't get too much for some time.

INT: That's what I understand. Others have been saying that. Do you think that was a problem?

NAR: Yeah, very definitely, because you would get calls from the people, and you didn't exactly how to answer them.

INT: What kind of calls were you getting?

NAR: Well, a lot of the people had heard it on the radio and wanted to know how much danger there was in this area in particular. And naturally, we didn't know. We didn't know how far they thought it might spread or anything like that.

INT: What kind of answers did you give them then?

NAR: Well, you had to give them general answer. That we didn't feel that there was anything to be alarmed about at the present time. Which turned out to be all right.

INT: You said that initially you didn't think that it was all that serious - there's been other problems there before and so forth...

NAR: Not at the... I mean problems at plants before, and of course, being with PP and L I'd known that there were problems.

INT: Did your feeling about that change over time? Did you feel that it got more serious or not?

NAR: Yes, I did feel that it was getting more serious, but then you had so many contradictory reports. Your news media, your television, and you just didn't know what to believe.

INT: We talked about that a little bit. You... were you following the media some?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Were you say that you were following it more than you usually do?

NAR: No, I wouldn't say so.

INT: You usually just keep track of what is going on there anyway.

NAR: Yeah

INT: You said something about conflicting reports, where were the conflicts coming from?

NAR: Well, one report would come out and say that there had been a large amount of radioactivity discharged, and the next one would say that there wasn't anything to be alarmed about. You just didn't know what the score was.

INT: Did you find that a problem?

NAR: Yes, very definitely. And even in this morning's paper they come out and say that it was a lot worse than they had ever reported, so where are you?

INT: Might go on with that, how do feel that Met Ed handled this handled this situation?

NAR: Well, I feel that Met Ed covered up, very definitely. They did not report what they should have reported. They were holding back.

INT: Do you think there's reason for that?

NAR: Being with a utility, I can see how they would act. Unfortunately I'm biased against Met Ed, and I have been for years. PP and L would definitely not have handled the thing the way Met Ed did.

INT: You feel they were just making sure that they were covered then?

NAR: Right.

INT: Did you find then a source of information that was more trustworthy in the whole situation?

NAR: Yeah, when Denton got here and started reporting, I felt that we were getting someplace.

INT: You felt that the National Regulatory Commission was doing a pretty good job here?

NAR: Yes, yeah. See, unfortunately PP and L is around Met Ed in certain areas. And I called PP and L, knowing that the powers that be in Allentown and our main office, and they knew nothing about it except what they had heard. They didn't get any report directly from Met Ed, and that is unusual. I mean, that is just not the way you operate.

INT: They would ordinarily have been kept posted?

NAR: That's right. Because, you see, we have this vast interchange of the whole central eastern part of the country and Met Ed is part of it, PP and L... and they want to know what is going on so they can supply power.

INT: That's one the reasons that leads you to think that there was a real... a cover-up going on and so forth?

NAR: That's right. Because PP and L knew nothing about it. I talked to our vice-president in Harrisburg, vice-president of our Harrisburg division, and he couldn't get me any information.

INT: What about the state level, do you think that they were handling things pretty well?

NAR: I do, yes. What they found out. But I think they were in the same shape as we were - the public - they just weren't getting the information they should have. And look how long it took them to report it to Washington.

INT: Do you think that the people in charge over there at the plant, do you think that they were in control of that situation at all?

NAR: No, I don't think they... Well, I think the training was lax, And I don't think they knew what to do when the thing happened. I think that was their problem.

INT: What made you feel that, what made you uneasy about it?

NAR: The way they were handling the thing. And they should what to do or what happened. But they didn't even seem to know that at the start of the thing.

INT: That improved when the NRC came in?

NAR: Right.

INT: Do you think that they are in control of the situation now?

NAR: I don't know. Babcock and Wilcock have been in, and they certainly should be able to tell them what to do. But they certainly need a lot of training, and see they want to bring this number one unit on, and you can't blame them for that, and just this morning there was a hairline crack in one of the pipes, water pipes. I should have the PP and L reporter up and show you the difference between the construction of the Three Mile Island plant and the plant that we're building up in Birwick.

INT: PP and L is building a new nuclear plant?

NAR: Oh yes. It's about 75 complete, the one unit. They hope to bring it on the line in '81.

INT: You feel this one will be much ... ?

NAR: Oh, yes. It's entirely differently constructed, the containment vessel and fuel elements.

INT: Did the situation worry you?

NAR: No, not in particular. Because of the distance... unless we would have gotten a report that the radioactivity was greater.

INT: Did you talk this over, apart from you work - obviously you had a lot of talk going on in relation to your responsibilities here and so forth - did you talk this over with you family?

NAR: Yes, we talked about it. No person was worried about it. See, I'm 12 miles further up west.

INT: So you didn't make any plans any different than from what you would usually have?

NAR: No.

INT: And you didn't think about leaving the area?

NAR: No.

INT: How do you feel about people who did leave the area?

NAR: Well, from what they were hearing and what they were reading, I think that they made a wise move, the people closer to the plant. Now we had, our plant is only 3 miles away and we gave our employees the opportunity to take their families and leave if they wanted to, and leave their work. And there are three units down there and we closed down 2 of them and only had one on stand-by basis over the weekend. Because... and the supervisors were willing to come in and operate it if there weren't any others available.

INT: And this is because of the stuff that was coming. . .this information that was coming about TMI?

NAR: Right.

INT: Do think that anything that happened at TMI might have affected you health?

NAR: No.

INT: Any other aspects of your community life?

NAR: No.

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

NAR: Well, it would have spread over a lot larger area it would have taken a good bit of the state of Pennsylvania.

INT: Very widespread?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: What would those effects have been?

NAR: Well, you would have had mass evacuation to start with, and you would have had panic.

INT: Is that a concern in your plan?

NAR: Yes, it was. And a lot of people did panic.

INT: Here?

NAR: Here, and in closer.

INT: What do you mean they panicked?

NAR: They just wanted to get out. They definitely didn't want to stay around the place.

INT: You were involved in the planning for the possible evacuation, is that so?

NAR: No.

INT: No, you were not involved in that?

NAR: See, I just happen to be... my desk just happens to be in that office. And that's how I got in on it.

INT: And you got commandeered in the middle of all this.

NAR: Just during working hours, I wasn't in on any over-time.

INT: Do you have notions about how radiation might have affected life around here if it had gotten bad?

NAR: Yeah, cause I took a course with PP and L on radioactivity. Well, I'm afraid I would have gotten out of the place.

INT: Is that what would have told you to leave?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: What would it have done to the area, do you think?

NAR: Well, it would have ruined it. It would have definitely ruined it.

INT: It would have affected all of life?

NAR: Oh yes, very definitely. Matter of fact, you wouldn't have been able to come back into the area.

INT: For how long?

NAR: Oh, 20-25 years.

INT: So it would just have been a completely dead area?

NAR: That's right.

INT: Did you think about any of that during the course... ?

NAR: No. I didn't think that the thing was bad enough and I felt that there were enough safe-guards in that containment vessel that it wouldn't blow up.

INT: Wouldn't do that?

NAR: Right.

INT: Did the event at the time that you were going through it bring to mind any past experiences?

NAR: Nothing more than this course I had taken in radioactivity.

INT: That puts you in a good position to understand what was going on, didn't it?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: You think of any historical events?

NAR: No. Yeah - Hiroshima. Yes I did. It flashed across your mind.

INT: Why do you think it made that connection?

NAR: Well, we knew what happened when that bomb was dropped and the radioactivity. Nuclear power, and naturally we've had several courses of that in PP and L.

INT: That's a connection a lot of people...

NAR: That's right, and the destruction and the amount of lives that were lost.

INT: Would you say that this sort of an accident or potential accident, really, I guess, is more or less frightening to people than, say, a flood or a hurricane, or?

NAR: You have a perfect of that. We had this TMI thing, they are still covering the newspapers with it. We had, what, 273 people killed out in Chicago. And who talks about that today?

INT: So it must be more than? What do you think accounts for the fear there?

NAR: Well, don't you think that it's the news media that keeps the thing before the American public?

INT: Certainly.

NAR: And for the entire world, in fact. All the countries are talking about it. And yet you take one airplane that'll kill 273 people and we had no person killed here, we don't know what might happen in years to come...

INT: Do you think that's maybe why they are preoccupied with it?

NAR: Yes.

INT: Because we don't know or because we... ?

NAR: Because we don't know.

INT: Do you remember at any time during this having any sort of daydreams?

NAR: No.

INT: Did you have any sleeping dreams that you can remember?

NAR: No.

INT: Sleep was undisturbed?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Do you think that people around you changed during the incident?

NAR: No. I don't.

INT: Apart from they're doing more, just doing more...?

NAR: No, I don't think so. The people that were involved in it, yes. But the ordinary citizen, I wouldn't say...

INT: Do you think that the event changed them in any lasting way? Or changed the community in any lasting way?



NAR: I don't think so. No.

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

NAR: No.

INT: Have you... do you have an opinion about nuclear and so for, what we have to do?

NAR: Very definitely I think we have it. And of course I get that from my PP and L background. But, we have to have electric power - we know that. And it's just like this gasoline situation that we're in right now - the American public is not going to save, they are not going to cut down on their use of either gasoline or of electricity. Energy. And we have to have it. And I know from experience and from working on electricity that once you get a nuclear plant built, that you can supply the current, I mean it's cheaper to generate than it is with any other type of fuel. Now, it costs more to build the plant, but in the long run, it's still can be supplied cheaper.

INT: And therefore, we have to go on with it?

NAR: That's right.

INT: Do you think that we have learned anything form this?

NAR: Oh, definitely. Very definitely we've learned from it.

INT: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, or say about all of this? Something I've missed?

NAR: No, I think you have covered it. We found out one thing, and that was that even with all of the publicity, that the people still didn't believe your answers sometimes. A lot of the people from this area, the Carlisle area, would call in and want to know if we thought that they should leave. And don't think that they really believed you. And yet we were supposed to have the information right at our fingertips.

INT: Why do you think they didn't trust that?

NAR: I think because of the conflicting news media stories.

INT: Because there were so many versions of all of this?

NAR: Yeah. NBC built the thing all out of proportion on television.

INT: I see, so you are making a distinction between the national media and the local media?

NAR: Yeah.

INT: Do think that this might have something to do with not trusting Met Ed, too?

NAR: I think so, very definitely. But when NRC came in, they very definitely proved that Met Ed wasn't giving the true story.

INT: Is there anything that you think could have been done more effectively here?

NAR: You mean as to evacuation and planning?

INT: Yes, any of it?

NAR: No. See, we had 3-4- men come in from outside who had training in this type of evacuation and the problem and they went right to work. And then we had John Brogess who did a marvelous job. He practically wrote the whole plan of evacuation.

INT: Guess that puts us in an interesting position, now, doesn't it?

NAR: Right now we're making a survey on this gasoline situation for fire engines, fire departments, ambulances, meal on wheels, moving the aged.

INT: It's pretty miserable out there, it's pretty hard to get gas. I suppose I sense that this is all tied up, huh?

NAR: Yeah, the whole thing. I mean, this is the emergency preparedness department. Case you have a chemical tank car on the railroad derail - they have to be prepared for that. Floods... it's all tied up together. And of course it did advance the definite for evacuation. We have to admit that. Because there wasn't any definite plan prior to this thing.

INT: And now there is a big one, isn't there?

NAR: Yeah, yeah.

INT: Amazing amount of work done in that period.

NAR: There are 3 men from the War College working on plans of.

INT: Yes, I think they're on my list, I think . . .

NAR: Two, three colonels, I think. Wheeler and I forget the other two.

INT: Yes, I think Mr. Blosser suggested that I...

NAR: Well, they are doing an awful lot of work. And they are also working on the impact to the area. What impact it had. .

INT: In economic terms and so forth?

NAR: Yes. So they'll be able to give you a lot of advice and information.

INT: I'll have to go and talk to them. Thank you for talking to me.

NAR: You're quite welcome.