

1 Frances Ryder Interview
May 12, 1987

Interviewer
Mary Kasamatsu

MK ~~Name~~ Mrs. Ryder, what is your full name?

FR Frances B., do you want my name or my married name. I go by Mrs. B. F. Ryder.

MK Your name is Frances B.

MK What was your maiden name.

FR Well, I was married twice. My maiden name was Burdett. I came from Pittsford, Vermont.

MK Good. Okay, I am with Mrs. Ryder in Waterbury Center. This is May 12, 1987. We are going to talk about the 1927 flood. Just to get things straight, were you married to Mr. Ryder *at the time of the flood?*

FR No, I was Mrs. Randall then. My husband was owner of Randall's Pharmacy and that is one reason that we were allowed to go over through the notch. One of the first cars, because they needed typhoid serum. They wanted to get rid of me because I was very pregnant and nobody wanted me around. No water and everybody was afraid I would have that baby.

MK You were very pregnant. What do you remember when the rain started to fall? What were you doing? It was November...

FR We didn't get disturbed about rising water until late in the afternoon because the Winooski has flooded almost every year anyhow. But then, of course we had had several days of very hard rains and between 4:00 and 5:00 o'clock, people with small children began to leave their homes. They could see that there was trouble coming. Most of us down in the village went over to the Inn, because of course that was a three or four story building. We didn't leave. My husband and I were living with his grandmother in the brick house across from the shopping center and it is now a motel. We didn't leave until the water was coming in the front door. The reason that we left, of course, we would have been safer in that brick building than we were in a framed building at the Inn, but Garger Randall ^{was} scared to death that that baby would come. She didn't want to be alone with that.

MK When did you leave then?

FR I imagine it was between 7:00 and 8:00 o'clock and we went over in a row boat. The one thing that I remember. There were loads of people at the Inn. One man had each floor and they were scared to death of fire because of people smoking you know. Then another man was patrolling to tell us how fast the water was rising which wasn't any help you know because everybody was pretty disturbed about the whole thing. It did get up to the last step to the second floor. The water stopped then.

MK The first floor of the Inn was totally under water?

FR Oh! yes. I couldn't help but think, there were so many people in there. Mr. & Mrs. Davis owned the Inn at that time and how wonderful they were. That Inn must have been a mess with all the people there. This is a strange thing because I love to eat. I don't remember a thing about eating. But I know that they provided food there at the Inn. What they had. We left the next day by row boat out the fire escape from the Inn.

MK Where did you go then?

FR Well, the water was still up half way up Bank Hill and that night we stayed up in Mill Village at Mr. & Mrs. Seeberry's. When she saw me, I weighed over 200 lbs. She couldn't wait to get me out of the house the next day. I never felt so unwelcome in all my life anywhere I went. The people just wanted to get rid of me. Thursday night we were at the Inn and Friday night at Seeberry's and all of us who were able went down to the church where people were getting stuff to eat. Stowe sent down as soon as they could get through, they sent down milk, bread and I think many of the housewives up there had baked all night when they heard what was going on. They sent down food and so all of us that were able bodied were making sandwiches and coffee and that sort of thing. There really wasn't much rhyme to reason to the meals until Miss Luce showed up on Monday morning after the flood and she was a great organizer. From then on, they had what meals they could. There was oatmeal and donuts, coffee and milk available 24 hours a day for these kids that had come in from Norwich and Middlebury and the University and the Army. Some of them worked all night. They could stop in there for oatmeal, donuts, milk and coffee. Until Monday, most of the diet was sandwiches. The grocery stores in town that were affected sent in all of there canned goods with no labels. The labels were off them. You opened a can, you didn't have any idea what was going to be in that can you know. We existed on that sort of thing. But Burlington sent up a lot of stuff too! They sent up Thanksgiving Dinner and Christmas Dinner. Great milk cans full of turkey and really they put on a good Thanksgiving Dinner and Christmas Dinner. Of course, I wasn't here. Miss Marjorie told about that.

MK How many people were they feeding still all the way through until Christmas?

FR Golly, I don't know. A lot. There were all these workers in here and with no water in the houses, people just had to navigate up to the Church to get something to eat.

Frances Ryder

Page 3

MK Where did people stay? All the people that came into work in the clean-up effort.

FR I don't know. Most people went back to their houses when they could. But there wasn't much of anything they could do except shovel mud until the water was turned on you see. After the water was turned on, the 13th, people just took hoses and went over the walls and the ceiling and everything.

MK You said the 13th, is that November or December?

FR November.

MK Two things I would like to go back and pick up on. First off you said you were describing what Miss Luce told you about the potatoes and those being one of the few things that you had to eat that was available. Could you tell me that again ?

FR People in the village that had been affected took things out of their cellar that they had stored for the winter. They brought all these potatoes up to the church and they were covered with mud and very cold. The water was so scarce that they had to be peeled in all that mud and then they were dipped in water before they were cooked.

MK So that you were dealing with mud crusted potatoes.

FR That's right. She said they were awful mean to peel because they were so cold.

MK The church had water. How did the Church have water. I thought there was no water.

FR No. The farmers who had their own water supply around town brought water in in milk cans. That is all the water they had until the 13th.

MK So the sanitary conditions in the town must have been pretty bad.

FR And yet, there wasn't one single case of typhoid. They lined up on the house right next to the church for shots, almost immediately. Because I know, my husband brought home typhoid serum when he took me to Burlington. Of course, there was a crew of doctors came up too! I imagine that they also brought serum. But it is amazing at a time like that that there wasn't a case.

MK People really did have to pitch in and help each other.

FR Oh yes. I didn't hear, if there was any vandalism, I didn't hear of it. I stayed in Burlington until the baby was born. But my husband came down two or three times. They said that when the army came in here that was a contingent from Fort Ethen Allen that they were supposed to guard against vandalism. But as I understand it what they did for the town was clean up cellars. Just shovel mud out of the cellars. One of these ladies that was up here, Saturday, said that just recently she found flood mud in her house. It was in the cupboard you know. It just had sifted out. It was still there. It was incredible the mess that we had here. You would have to be here to believe it.

MK It's amazing. That is incredible.

FR I made some notes here. This probably has been documented. There was one canoe and one row boat that were getting people out of their houses. In early evening and then the firemen later on had a row boat, but I imagine that is in some of the documentaries. Do you know where Perkins Store is?

MK Yes.

FR In the apartment in that store when the water began to rise, the owner of the store was living in the apartment at that time and they got out in a coffin. Can you imagine rowing out in the street in a coffin. I don't know whether you have that anywhere or not, but I know that is true.

MK I haven't come across that.

FR And they found out that after the water went down that the canoe that was used was really in a very dangerous condition. Some of the things that held the thing together underneath were gone. Of course, we always thought that it was so incredible what was happening that it saved a lot of peoples lives because they didn't try to get out, they stayed in their homes.

MK They just moved to the top floor.

FR Yes.

MK It's amazing. When you did leave, when you mention Mill Village. Where is that from where you were in Waterbury?

FR Well it is on the Stowe road before you get to Colbyville. It is just that little settlement there.

MK Okay, then you left from there then to drive out or did you still have to row part way to get to some place where you could drive.

FR No, we went by boat to the top of Bank Hill and then by car. You could get up to Mill Village by car.

MK So then from Mill Village you could drive from there. You said the only way to get out of the whole area was...

FR Was through the notch.

MK Through Smugglers Notch.

FR Nothing came in or went out except through that notch. That was a horrible trip because of all the dead animals you know. Of course it was two or three days after the flood and they hadn't had a chance to clean up. I remember how seeing all these horses, cows, all swollen up from lying there. It was an awful trip.

MK How long did it take?

FR Gosh, I don't remember.

MK What did you find when you got to Burlington? Were they comparatively unaffected by this.

FR Yes. I was fortunate. One of my college friends was there. I stayed with her until the baby was born. The baby wasn't born until the 12th of December. I will never forget. It annoys me to have a gynecologist-obstetrician tell a young woman who is expecting a baby that it may come anytime, that the baby is in position. My date was December 12 and I had been to the doctor just a few days before the flood and he said well the baby is in position and you can expect it anytime. Here it was over a month. So when any of the my granddaughters say there baby might come anytime, I say don't expect it.

MK A very wise person said to me when I was expecting my first child, "The baby will come when it is ready."

FR My obstetrician was a Dr. McGuire in Montpelier. Of course, you couldn't get to Montpelier, so I had to change in Burlington.

MK At rather the last moment. Was the baby born at one of the hospitals in Burlington.

Frances Ryder

Page 6

FR No, I wanted a nurse who had graduated from Peter Bent and at that time the Mary Fletcher wasn't taking any nurses that didn't graduate from their place. So there was a ~~Place~~^{Place} Sanatorium, I guess it is called, where I went and had the baby so I could have this nurse that I wanted, a friend.

MK So that was a nurse-midwife. Was it a midwife?

FR No, she was just a friend of mine and she offered to take care of me while I was there.

MK Did she deliver the baby?

FR No, No. I had a gynecologist deliver the baby. Dr. Eastman.

MK How soon were you able to come back to Waterbury?

FR I couldn't come back after the baby was born because the house wasn't all clean. So I went down to my father and mother's in Pittsford and stayed there for several weeks. I was in the hospital for Christmas and I would say probably it was the middle of January when I came back.

MK Had your husband been able to visit you.

FR He came down a couple of times. But his store was affected so he had plenty of work to do in Waterbury.

MK What did Waterbury look like when you did come back? How long had the clean-up efforts progressed?

FR The clean-up efforts had progressed and of course there was snow then so it covered a lot of it. I didn't think too much about it. I just felt knowing what it looked like when I left, what a terrific job they had done.

MK I can imagine there was still a fair amount to clean up when the snow melted.

FR Oh yes. I will look down here and see if there is anything else that she brought out. Stowe did an awful lot for this town as did Burlington. I thought it was interesting that they had oatmeal, donuts, coffee and milk 24 hours a day for the workers. Miss Marjorie said one milk can of turkey which was sent up from Burlington was sour. She had to throw it out. The kitchen help was so mad at her for disposing of that but she didn't dare let people eat it you know. I guess there was trouble with milk. You wouldn't think there would be at that time of year for that souring that the farmers brought in.

MK You would think that it would be cool enough to set outdoors.

FR But she said really ~~and~~ that Burlington was the outfit that sent the food in, that they really had a good Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner.

MK Now earlier you said too, that when people used to talk they would preface things as being "before the Flood" or "after the Flood."

FR That went on for years. I would say, the flood was in 1927, I would say until about 10 years ago. Everything was dated before or after the flood.

MK If somebody would say to you when did such and such happen?

FR It would either before the flood or after the flood. That was the answer.

MK Maybe 20 years after, but that was the answer.

FR That's right. Well, it was quite an experience.

MK There must have been a lot of people whose lives were pulled apart in ways they couldn't put them back together.

FR Of course the whole town was terribly upset about the Cutting family. They lived down toward the other end of town on South Main Street. They got frightened. Mr. Cutting took off a door and they tried to get out that way. Mrs. Cutting ^{and my} and the three children. There was a real current in that flood ^{and my} were lost and he was found in a tree the next day. He survived. But, he was the only one that did. Then other people over on Randall Street. Of course, the Winooski River runs in back of Randall Street, saw several things that were disturbing. Houses with people in them. One house the people had a lantern and they were waving the lantern. They knew it was the end for them you know.

MK The whole house was being carried down the river.

FR Sure, there were several houses that went down the river. So you can see what the current was. That is what made it so dangerous you see. Then when the old Gilbert house at the corner of Park Row and Randall Street, there was a horse on top of the roof, the porch roof. They had to get that off the next day before the water went down. Man people were eating their dinner maybe when the water started getting very dangerous and they went upstairs and when they came down the next morning the dinner was on the ceiling. There were funny things that happened. There were some laughs too! There were more tears than laughter. People were good sports. The way the women took over at the church to see that people were fed was really something.

MK About how large was the town when that happened?

FR I don't think they ever at that time, or whether they do now, of course the patient load at the hospital isn't anywhere near as great as it used to be, but I think it was between 3,000 and 4,000 and I think it was nearer 3,000 than 4,000.

MK That would include the hospital?

FR No.

MK Without the hospital, I see. So when the women took over to get everybody fed they were really pulling together ???

FR That's right. I have always heard how docile the patients were. They didn't have any trouble with them at all. They moved them. They had to move them all in wards in the second floor you know. Of course, everybody wondered how that would turn out. No trouble at all.

MK How long did Miss Luce stay?

FR She stayed until after Christmas. She said that there was no point in her or this friend of hers who was up here from the Extension Service helping her, they couldn't get anywhere in the State to do their jobs, so they might just as well be working up here as staying in Burlington, because so many bridges were down. You just couldn't get from one place to another.

MK Were there telegraph communications?

FR There were telephone communications in just within two or three days, but I wanted to get word to my father and mother in Pittsford that we were alright. I telegraphed and they didn't get the telegram until after I was in Burlington.

MK Because nobody could deliver it to them?

FR No, I don't know what the hitch was. Maybe, there were so many.

MK Maybe, yes.

FR But I remember I called them from Burlington and they wondered what was going on over here, because they knew the Winooski flooded every spring and they received a telegram after my call. But the army did bring in radio equipment so that I imagine that was a help. But of course, I suppose it was just a business thing as they were. It was amazing how fast the water receded. Miss

Marjorie said the other day that when she got up here Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon, that it was just mud and she said that the postmasters car was just filled with bags of mail that had accumulated you see and he wasn't going to give her a ride home at first. Then he said well, maybe he would if she was coming up to help. She said that was what she was coming for and she said she had to lie on these bags of mail, because the car was just filled with it.

MK Did she drive in.

FR She came with this mailman.

MK I see, she came all the way from Burlington with him. I see.

FR She told another funny thing that happened. She went up to the church Monday morning and her father was there. A lot of us were making sandwiches and he took her to one side and said for God sake take over here and run it. It needed somebody to run it and of course she was the perfect one to do it.

MK I am assuming that was your first baby?

FR Oh yes.

MK Because you hadn't mentioned other children. Was it a boy or a girl?

FR It was a girl. I never felt so uncomfortable in my life because everybody wanted to get rid of me. What would have happened with no water? But it isn't a very nice feeling to have everybody want to see the end of you. I can understand it, and I am sure I would have felt the same way. And then to wait all that time!

MK Do you remember what happened to the schools around this area?

FR There were a lot of people that went to the school that night. The people that didn't go to the Inn went to the school. There were loads of people up there too! Of course, all of them went to the church to be fed also. I don't know when school opened. because I wasn't here, but it certainly must have been awhile.

MK Well, thank you very much...

FR I hope you edit that because there will probably be a lot that you won't want.

MK That is perfectly alright. One thing that I also have to do which will just take about 30 seconds or less, I have to get a little bit of the sound of the room just to have it for editing purposes.