





1997 GRAND FORKS FLOOD

When History Became Personal

BY KIMBERLY K. PORTER

It has been two decades since the deluge. At times it seems as if it were only weeks ago. I hear a siren and my heart races; for years my cat—now deceased—heard a siren and instinctively vomited. The aftermath of the 1997 flood remains with us still. We bought a house in the country to get away from the sirens, but also to put some distance between us and the river. No flood insurance issues for us!

Other times, it seems as if it has been a lifetime or perhaps never even happened. Perhaps it is just a movie we saw years ago. Perhaps it was a disaster that occurred elsewhere, happened to other people, took place in some faraway time. We watched the carnage on television and wondered why the residents of a besieged community remained so long in place. And why would anyone want to live *there*? Or, if it did happen, it wasn't all that bad. The water wasn't all that deep, or all that cold; mucking out the basement was just a thorough spring cleaning.

Still, it did happen. The markers around Grand Forks are too obvious to ignore. Lincoln Park hides behind an earthen dike; a floodwall hugs the river; city parks stand where homes used to be; old friends write from new, distant addresses; and downtown buildings slowly gain new tenants.

The story is now a familiar one. On April 19, 1997, the Red River of the North breached the dikes surrounding Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, forcing the evacuation of more than 60,000 residents. By late afternoon, as the cities' residents fled to the drone of storm sirens, the business district burned and the Red River broadened

Reverse: An aerial view of downtown Grand Forks, North Dakota (foreground), and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, on Monday, April 21, 1997. In the center of the photograph are the Great Northern Railway bridge and Sorlie Bridge over the Red River of the North. *Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune, April 22, 1997, 1A*

On April 19, 1997, the Red River of the North breached the dikes surrounding Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, forcing the evacuation of more than 60,000 residents.

its grasp, slowly, inexorably claiming neighborhood after neighborhood for its own. According to a well-traveled rumor, this was the most complete evacuation of a community since the citizens of Gettysburg were forced to take flight.¹

Among those taking flight were historians, archivists, sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists from the University of North Dakota. Their semester prematurely ended, many academics sought not only to make sense of the ordeal for themselves and their families, but to incorporate the experience for classroom and research purposes. Others sought simply

to preserve the moment for future, unknown researchers.

This essay explores the project undertaken to preserve the multitude of flood experiences, as well as the involvement of the community in the process. It discusses the development of the North Dakota Museum of Art oral history project, the effort to train volunteers, and the rush to gather the stories from the multitude of charitable volunteers and military personnel who served Greater Grand Forks. It also explores the desire to make the project a useful resource for other communities in disaster recovery. I offer this essay as a personal reflection of the flood of 1997.



In mid-April 1997, I was homeless, sleeping on a floor in Minneapolis, frantically making telephone calls; I was trying to reconstruct my network of family and friends, while attempting not to disturb my hosts and their four-month-old daughter. In between the long calls to parents, siblings, and friends, as well as those to the Red Cross, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration, and the University of North Dakota (UND), I walked the miles of pathways in Minnehaha Park. As I walked and questioned what had befallen my world, I came to the understanding that just as the waters would ultimately recede, memories of the flood would do so as well. Accordingly, I resolved that the experiences we had endured must not be forgotten. As a historian, that was my responsibility. And if, along the way, I could make

sense of the occurrence for myself, all the better.

My water-drenched life resumed some sense of purpose. In the aftermath of the oral history project that arose from these musings, I, and others, wondered as to the “soundness” (pun intended) of the project. Were we, as historians, sociologists, and other forms of academics, too close to the subject at hand? Did we have anything remotely resembling the distance we needed from the project to make for quality results? Should our labors more appropriately be considered the work of memoirists? Was this a therapeutic exercise or one more qualified as research?²

Apparently, I was not alone in my musings or in my plans for grant writing. For when I returned to Grand Forks two weeks later and began the monumental task of cleaning up my life, I met a number of individuals from the UND

academic community who had come to the same conclusion: memories of the flood of 1997 must be preserved; the flood must be made to deposit as well as to erode; the flood must be made into a benefit, even if limited.

The question was simple: How? The answer was as diverse as the individuals who gathered in early June in response to a call from Laurel Reuter of the North Dakota Museum of Art.³

A long-term member of the arts community in not only Grand Forks but also on the national stage, Reuter held the distinct belief that the museum had a responsibility to its community. Indeed, in the May 5, 1997, *Grand Forks Herald*, she offered:

The North Dakota Museum of Art is available, free of charge, to the community for religious and



Above: University of North Dakota students sandbag along the English Coulee near Wilkerson Hall in April 1997. *John Stennes/Grand Forks Herald, April 17, 1997*

Left: Volunteers unload and stack sandbags outside the Chester Fritz Auditorium on the campus of the University of North Dakota on Sunday, April 20, 1997. *Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune, April 23, 1997, 5C*



Aerial view of a flooded Grand Forks neighborhood after the Red River breached a dike and sandbag barrier. SHSND SA 32189-00172



About eight feet of water covers the Lincoln Drive area on April 18, 1997. Homes were evacuated hours before the dikes gave way. Jackie Lorentz/Grand Forks Herald, April 19, 1997



A search and rescue team navigates a flooded Grand Forks neighborhood by boat. Firefighters, police officers, and National Guard troops acted as search and rescue personnel during the flood. SHSND SA 32189-00182

ceremonial purposes, including weddings, memorial services, ordinations, and religious services. The museum also offers its space and assistance to other arts groups, or not-for-profits, needing a place to meet, perform, practice, or regroup. We recognize the fragility of cultural life in times such as these and so offer our services to those who need them.⁴

Reuter's generosity did not end with the offer to host the ceremonies and celebrations of our recovery; rather, she held forth that "it is the role of an art museum to translate the experience of its community into artistic language."⁵ Accordingly, "the North Dakota Museum of Art embarked upon a dozen artistic commissions including both theater and visual arts, an oral history project . . . an exhibition and book of images taken by fifty-seven amateur, national and international photographers, and a design forum to assist in looking to the future."⁶

Reuter's insight took into account that in the midst of an epic disaster, few individuals would have either the time or the energy to undertake the projects that would culturally define our community in the flood's aftermath. When the basements were pumped, the sheetrock stripped, the treasures hauled to the berm, and a fresh coat of paint applied, it would be too late to create the artistic responses to the deluge that critically followed the water's rise and fall. Time would fade the memories and distance critical individuals from the scene.

Reuter's question for the community was relatively simple: How should the flood of 1997 be preserved to benefit future generations? The question was not directed to professional artists alone but rather generously encouraged non-professionals to turn their attention to subject matter beyond their personal issues. The medium also

varied. For some the solution fell to photography; for others visual arts, poetry, or fiction, and even theatrical productions. Others, although thoroughly adrift in a sea of clean-up, reconstruction, and paperwork, found their answers in gathering a mountain of documentary evidence: National Weather Service flood forecasts, disaster declarations, city evacuation plans, piles of the *Grand Forks Herald*, Salvation Army location lists, and Red Cross clean-up tips.⁷

One individual noted, "More than anything, I want my kids, my grandkids, the world to know what this felt like."

While disciples of different disciplines began their projects, a number of volunteers were not satisfied. As we met yet one more time to discuss the appropriate form for memorializing our experience, one individual noted, "More than anything, I want my kids, my grandkids, the world to know what this felt like": fleeing in the night, sleeping in a shelter, standing in line for countless hours, gratefully accepting the nation's charity, watching our city burn, wondering for days what was left to return to, and realizing that at least 60,000 individuals shared our experience.⁸

Indeed, second only to cleaning out the wreckage of our homes was the overwhelming compulsion of everyone to tell their stories. When did it first dawn on them that the water would win—that nature could not be controlled? When were they evacuated? Where did they go? Who helped them? When they returned, what did they find? How high was their water? What did they lose? What was the hardest part of the entire experience? When did they get their electricity back? Who was the "Angel" offering thousands of dollars to affected households, and did it really matter? What happened to flood victims' friends? What does

the future hold? Like the Ancient Mariner, all needed to tell.⁹

With the help of Jaclyn Jeffrey, then of Baylor University, and the guidance of a skilled grant writer at the North Dakota Museum of Art—as well as an assortment of dated books from UND's library—the project took shape. A dozen quality recorders were ordered, hundreds of tape cassettes found a place in the museum's basement, and legal release forms were devised, as was training in the ways of the American Public University System Institutional Review Board. Volunteers viewed videos of "perfect" oral history interviews, as well as learned the methods by which a potentially good interview could be thrown off track.

I became somewhat of an unofficial advisor to the endeavor, having expressed an interest in the form—and having confessed to not only using others' recorded memories in my own research, but also to having conducted interviews for a volume on Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and to once even having indexed an oral history collection.¹⁰

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Grand Forks mayor Pat Owens pauses during a press briefing on the ongoing flood situation. *Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune*

1997 Great Grand Forks Flood Chronology

1996

November

16-17 Blizzard Andy leaves 12 inches of snow

December

16-18 Blizzard Betty dumps 8.7 inches of snow

20 Blizzard Christopher drops 4.2 inches of snow

1997

January

9-11 Blizzard Doris brings 8.8 inches of snow and wind chills of –80 degrees

12 President Bill Clinton declares the region a disaster zone

13 North Dakota opens Bismarck-based Emergency Operations Center

14-16 Wind chills of –70 degrees accompany Blizzard Elmo, which drops .4 inches of snow; President Clinton releases \$5 million in emergency funds to North and South Dakota

22-23 Blizzard Franzi leaves 8.6 inches of snow

February

28 National Weather Service forecasts a flood of 47–49 feet at Grand Forks

March

4 40-mph winds accompany Blizzard Gust's .2 inches of snow

31 Grand Forks Emergency Operations Center opens to the public

April

3 Sandbagging and dike construction begin in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks

4 Red River of the North reaches flood stage of 28 feet

5 Blizzard Hannah rages, dropping 6.3 inches of snow and freezing rain

7 President Clinton declares North Dakota a disaster area for second time in three months

8 Governor Ed Schafer activates North Dakota National Guard

16 Red River rises above 48.88 feet, marking a new high point for the century

17 Red Cross opens evacuation shelter at Grand Forks Civic Auditorium; Sorlie Bridge closes

18 City orders evacuation of certain areas

19 Grand Forks water plant fails; University of North Dakota cancels classes for the remainder of the semester; fire breaks out in downtown Grand Forks

20 Grand Forks water supply exhausted; 75 percent of Grand Forks residents evacuated

22 Red River crests at 54.35 feet; President Clinton visits Grand Forks

26 Red River falls below 50 feet; flood damage for Grand Forks and East Grand Forks estimated at \$775 million

27 Interstate 29 reopens between Fargo and Grand Forks; tons of relief supplies begin to arrive

29 Anonymous "Angel" pledges to give \$2,000 to each household in evacuation area

May

8 Second "Angel" donates \$5 million to the people of Greater Grand Forks

12 Potable (drinkable) water restored to Grand Forks residents

19 Red River falls below flood stage—28 feet—for the first time in 46 days

June

12 President Clinton signs bill giving \$8.6 billion in disaster relief to flood-stricken communities in the Dakotas, Minnesota, and thirty other states

On successive Saturdays, we gathered in the North Dakota Museum of Art to focus our energies, determine our goals, and train our volunteers. As the initial forty volunteers dwindled to approximately twenty, we decided to direct our attention to the broadest ranges of the flood experience. We would attempt to gather the stories of people from all walks of life—city officials and workers who had conducted the most courageous of battles, residents whose homes were totally destroyed, business people who lost a lifetime of work, and young people who helped build the dikes. We also wanted the stories of the elderly who were carried from their homes on payloaders, the residents of neighboring towns who provided us refuge while in exile, and inmates from the county jail who suddenly found themselves housed in a Catholic church. We also sought the stories of those financially strapped and unable to see beyond the day, and those with the financial wherewithal to guide their own recovery. We sought the insight of clergy, firefighters, and police officers. Our list of the “significant” went on and on.

The corps of volunteers came from all walks of life. Some were longtime residents of Grand Forks, others were new arrivals; many were academics, some were retirees; some had sustained considerable damage to their homes, and others had escaped the waters with only minimal damage. Their purposes in volunteering for the project were as varied as their own flood stories. The volunteers would attempt to gather the wide-ranging stories of stoicism and selflessness, heroism and heartbreak, courage and confusion, tragedy and triumph, abandonment and achievement, determination and devastation. As one volunteer reflected on the goals, he noted the project was a “kind of Noah’s Ark, saving our best from the flood.”¹¹

While some might question the decision to save our “best from the



Grand Forks firefighters Mike Sande, left, and Randy Johnson work in flood waters as they battle the fire that destroyed the Security Building downtown on Saturday, April 19, 1997. Bill Alkofer/St. Paul Pioneer Press, April 20, 1997, 24A



The Security Building, the first of eleven downtown Grand Forks buildings to go up in flames, stands in ruins on April 20, 1997. *Eric Hylden/Grand Forks Herald, April 21, 1997*



flood,” limiting the value of the final project, the reason was simple: time and energy are finite, as are financial resources. Cash might be augmented via grants, but time appeared to be the most valuable of resources. Time would steal the memories of individuals involved; time would take professional charitable assistants to distant disasters; time would take volunteers back to their primary occupations; time would prevent the most severely impacted from the opportunity to record their thoughts before they chose to leave the community. Were the interviews conducted the actual “best”? Perhaps not, but they were the best that circumstances allowed.

The project was ambitious, but given our relatively untrained enthusiasm, it did not seem all that impossible. Initially, we did not even feel all that hampered by a lack of deep-pocketed funding. With all of the rebuilding and calls upon charitable trusts, no sponsor could be found. The first round of interviews would be collected on personal tape recorders, on tapes purchased by the North Dakota Museum of Art, and transcribed by the hardest of volunteers. The nature of oral history interviews provided a necessary, creative, action-oriented release for some of the individuals involved. Oral history has long been accepted as having a measure of non-professional psychotherapeutic benefit. While most interviewers do not carry the credentials to offer true therapy, the simple fact of having someone listen to you speak about your experience offers some form of release. The narrator—the proper term for the person being interviewed—feels that someone cares about them and is taking the most precious commodity in our modern world: time to listen.¹²

While research and preparation for interviews is absolutely essential, we felt assured that the volunteers were ready for the challenge. For the most part, all had evacuated their homes,

mucked their basements, stood in endless lines, and eaten the repasts prepared by the generous Southern Baptists. The shared experiences provided a common vocabulary and mental database of times, places, events, etc. All clearly understood the purpose of the project and shared in the need to make sense of the experience we had endured. Of course it in no way hampered the project that the volunteer interviewers were already in the city and willing to do their best for the endeavor.¹³

Primary fears involved the lack of training in the interview process, particularly with the technical side of the equipment, and the fact that each of us had a burning desire to tell anyone, and perhaps everyone, our story of the flood. In order to tackle the issue, a basic method was proposed. Each volunteer was paired with another whom they had not previously known well. They were assigned to interview one another, thus assuring that all of the volunteers would have their personal stories recorded for posterity, and also assuring that each amateur oral historian had at least one practice interview before hitting the streets of Grand Forks. Also, if the equipment overwhelmed the individual, the interview could be reconstructed. The majority of the recordings proved satisfactory for the purpose: people became familiar with the equipment, felt assured that their tales would be heard, and gained a sense of confidence. Some of the recordings became a part of the permanent collection, with the authorization of their creators.

When the project started, we knew that a portion of the interviews would be utilized in a commemorative display at the North Dakota Museum of Art. In order to provide a sense of thematic organization, we determined to focus at least part of every interview on a few structured questions: When did you evacuate? Where did you go? Where were you when you heard



A North Dakota National Guard truck tows a disabled Grand Forks fire department pumper truck through the floodwaters on DeMers Avenue in downtown Grand Forks. The fire department truck had responded to a fire on Saturday, April 19, 1997, when rising water inundated the vehicle. *Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune*

about the fire? What was the hardest thing to throw out? What was your proudest moment, and your most humbling? This series would provide structure to the museum's display, and also ease our subjects into a story they'd undoubtedly told a hundred times before.¹⁴

Besides assisting our sponsor organization—the North Dakota Museum of Art—two additional goals for the project arose. First and foremost was the creation of an archive of raw material detailing the flood for students and scholars—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, linguists, etc.—to examine, to reflect upon, and to use as primary sources for articles and essays both in the present day and in future years. The larger community of scholars, not just those associated with the University of North Dakota, could make use of these materials without suffering their own flood. Secondarily, many wanted to make sense of the flood for themselves and their disciplines, while simultaneously offering a commemoration of sorts to the community.

In addition to the formal settings and recordings, a number of short, pointed interviews were conducted at local celebrations of faith and survival. For example, at the city's "Grand Pasta Party on the Prairie," we set up a booth and asked a few specific questions. We also wandered the community barbecue provided by Texas Lil.¹⁵ Accordingly, we not only added to the number of individuals whose voices were to be heard, but also became aware of a multitude of new stories that needed to be pursued.

As an aside, I would also note that many of us were concerned with the sheer number of "transients" involved in the flood's history. As citizens of Grand Forks, we all had become aware of the fact that we were not alone in the process of recovery. Both before and after the inundation, the story of our town had become national, and even international, news. Accordingly, we had not only local individuals to focus upon in the process of recording the flood, but also individuals from all corners of the nation, and many from our near northern neighbor, Canada, as well. The perceptions of the

volunteers who had come to us in our darkest hour warranted attention. What had their first impression been? What did they expect to find? Why had they given so freely of their time and energy? Had the experience changed their lives?

Also, we needed to be aware of members of the National Guard, the Coast Guard, and those service members temporarily stationed at nearby Grand Forks Air Force Base. Moreover, we needed to contact representatives of the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Small Business Administration, Emergency Animal Rescue Service, World Vision, our college population, etc. Once again the list seemed endless.

Many of us feared that in addition to the obituary columns claiming the history of Grand Forks and the flood of 1997, the disasters of a nation in need would likewise claim the keepers of stories.¹⁶ How would we ever again gather the multitudes who had been in Grand Forks ever so briefly to assist us in our hour of need? And even if we did by chance reclaim the aid workers, how would they differentiate our plight from that of hurricane victims in Florida, mudslide casualties in California, or tornado-stricken residents of Tennessee? As the summer wore on, the decision was made, but not enforced, that volunteers should work at gathering the stories of those individuals who would soon disappear from our lives. This category also included the myriad of local residents who made the decision to leave Grand Forks for greener pastures and dryer feet.

At the end of August, we sat down to evaluate what the summer of interviewing had wrought. We could count 175 separate interviews, involving 200 individuals, comprising approximately 220 hours of tape. These totals did not include the numerous "mini-interviews" collected



at the celebrations of survival that dotted our summer.¹⁷

In the process of recording these stories, we heard the voice of LaVonne Swenson break as she told of evacuating her terminally ill husband. Via helicopter, he was transported from United Hospital (now Altru Hospital) to a gravel road where a fleet of ambulances from around the state, stretching at least a mile, awaited their precious cargo. Ambulances distributed patients around the state, airlifting the most dangerously ill to hospitals in the Twin Cities.¹⁸

We also heard the humility of Mike Sande, a Grand Forks firefighter as he relived the effort to save our downtown while struggling to stand chest-deep in thirty-eight-degree water. Describing his heroic laborers, Sande simply said, “Hey, I’m a firefighter, that’s what I do.” His insights into the fire and how it had been fought could not be gained from someone who had simply stood on the Cherry Street overpass writing about the experience at some later date. While the distance of time and the inclusion of a multitude of firefighters’ and police officers’ voices might have offered



Top: Three F-16 fighter jet hangars at the Grand Forks Air Force Base are filled with beds housing over 3,000 evacuees from the Red River Valley. Photo copyrighted by the Duluth News Tribune and reprinted with permission.



Bottom: President Bill Clinton speaks at Grand Forks Air Force Base approximately 10 miles west of Grand Forks, where hangars served as temporary shelter for several thousand evacuees. Clinton received an aerial tour of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks during his visit on April 22, 1997. Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune

Far left: A Red Cross representative delivers hot meals several weeks after the flood waters receded. Volunteers with the American Red Cross remained in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks during the prolonged flood recovery. Tom Stromme/Bismarck Tribune

a multilayered perspective, Sande’s heroism provided an immediacy that cannot be found elsewhere.¹⁹

We listened as Leonard and Marilyn Kouba, a couple in their seventies, explained that in fear of a devastating flood they had stored many of their possessions in a downtown Grand Forks warehouse owned by a daughter. When that warehouse caught on fire, the Koubas were without a single possession. In a reversal of roles, they started over with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and furniture borrowed from grandchildren. With a quaver in his voice, Leonard, a World War II veteran, compared the aftermath of the flood to his experiences in Germany.²⁰

We heard Michael Maidenberg, editor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Grand Forks Herald*, struggle to relate the decision to keep publishing the paper when it seemed as if the world was collapsing around him. “Just when it seemed it couldn’t get any worse, it did. And we’d made a new plan.”²¹ Over the entirety of the flood, he and his staff did not fail to make a single deadline from makeshift quarters in the Manvel, North Dakota, school.

We listened as Major Lannie Runck of the North Dakota National Guard described the effort to retrieve the photographs a cancer-stricken woman so desperately sought. With her family scattered to evacuation centers around the state, she wanted to pass from this Earth surrounded by their presence. In her home bedroom, she had arranged the photos around her bed so that she could see family from any angle or perspective. Now it appeared that she might die among strangers in her Devils Lake hospital bed. Alerted by family members, Runck and his team, traveling by Humvee, retrieved the photos, allowing the woman a peaceful passing.²²

With his inimitable sense of humor, Rev. William Sherman, a Roman Catholic priest and ethnographer, told of a special telephone call he received on April 18, 1997; it was from the Grand Forks County jailer:

“Father, I’ve got twenty minutes. I’ve gotta get seventy prisoners and ten guards out of this place right now.” So I said, “Well, gee, bring them over to St. Mike’s gym.” So in they came and I’m

trying to get them squared away and, you know orange uniforms and some of these guys had shackles, I know they had manacles and I guess they had shackles, too. They were kind of the baddies I guess. But they were nice guys. It was kind of a little break in the routine. They came in with their bedrolls and later on they came in with a whole bunch of food. And so I thought they, this is going to be all right, you know, for about two weeks we'll be a jail. 'Cause I knew some of those guys. At least they knew me. So I thought, man this is going to be kinda fun. You know, another adventure in life.

Well then comes a band of women prisoners. Now, what are we going to do? We can't put them in with that bunch of animals. There was a kind of show/dressing room below the stage, so that's where they put the gals. In the meantime I'm trying to run over there and say my prayer and run back and get them settled and about eleven o'clock at night Scott Hennen called and he said, "Father, you'd better say some words of encouragement on the air." And then I know oh, we're in trouble. Because they had just gotten word down there that they were

pulling everybody off the dikes. They were trying to save lives, not property, now.²³

From Sister Rebecca Metzger, administrator of St. Anne's Guest Home, we learned what the flood can mean to those who have dedicated their lives to others and their spiritual needs. Asked what she had learned about herself during the flood, she observed:

I'll say one thing, and it may sound very strange. It's interesting because we as religious take the vow of poverty, and you live by this and you work as a community and you share things. However, it was very humbling to be in a secondhand store someplace, not by choice but by necessity, knowing that you don't have anything else to wear, that you had to go and find something to wear. And so it was like, you know, I'm not doing this for anybody else. I'm doing it for me. And that was very humbling.²⁴

Not only was the experience humbling, it was also elevating. Tim Fought, opinion editor of the *Grand Forks Herald* during the flood, reflected in depth on what the experience had meant to him, and presumptively to so many others who had endured it:

In times of great trauma we respond accordingly. The adrenaline pumps and people do extraordinary things that they wouldn't have though they could do otherwise. And they do things that mark them for life. . . . It's possible that the people who went through the flood will never do things that are quite so noble, quite so inspired, quite so understanding, as the things that they did in the few weeks surrounding the flood, even if they did get them out of training or habit or instinct or out the genetic desire to survive and thrive.

The flood gave me an appreciation of the depth of the human capability and the human possibility. It gave me an understanding of what we're all able to do and that's pretty extraordinary. Amazing things happened in almost every household, in almost every life. Like the way people fled and came back, the way they adapted, the way they found new living circumstances, the way they worked their way through all the problems, the way they found solutions.²⁵

The stories broke our hearts, lifted our spirits, elevated our faith in humanity, and gave us the strength

The State Historical Society Responds

The first week of May 1997, four staff from the State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND) traveled to Grand Forks to aid in flood salvaging efforts at the Grand Forks County Historical Society's museum, the Myra Museum. SHSND Museum Division Director Chris Dill, State Archivist Gerald Newborg, Curator of Collections Management Carol Fenner, and Curator of Exhibits Claudia Berg worked with Myra Museum staff, volunteers, and employees from the Upper Midwest Conservation Association to recover and salvage 3,000 artifacts from exhibits and basement storage rooms of the museum. The museum's main storage area in the basement was flooded with twelve feet of water, and the exhibits also sustained heavy damage. Salvaging efforts involved removing the artifacts and transporting them to a recovery area at the National Guard Armory in Grand Forks, where artifacts were cleaned and laid out to dry. Other artifacts were temporarily frozen to prevent mold growth until cleaning and drying could commence. Frozen artifacts were stored at the Hope Locker Plant in Grand Forks, and many other area businesses donated recovery supplies.



A Grand Forks resident observes the aftermath of the flood, including trash emptied from homes and debris left by receding flood waters, on April 30, 1997.
SHSND SA 32189-00183

to reach out for more interviews. And while it would be deceptive to suggest we were not proud of our effort, all realized that significant problems remained. While we had indeed managed to capture much of the “transient” story, many longtime residents remained to be interviewed. Particularly weak were our efforts at gathering the stories of Grand Forks’s minority communities and its elderly citizens. The failure to gain the voices of these particular residents came with the conditions of our flooded landscape. Many Native American community members fled to Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation or Spirit Lake Indian Reservation. And given that many had family to spend their exile with, often they were unavailable for the inquiring historian or sociologist. Moreover, without individuals of Native American heritage on the interview trail, contacts were more difficult to make.

The Hispanic community within Grand Forks could not be accessed to the most desirable level due to an absence of Spanish-speaking interviewers. The same can be said of other non-English speaking populations among the residents of Grand Forks. As for the elderly, many moved in the aftermath of the flood, voluntarily or otherwise, to be near family members and became unavailable for interviews. Moreover, we had been lax in obtaining the stories of our city and university officials.

I would hasten to say that this was not entirely our fault. While the city’s and the University of North Dakota’s leadership had always displayed an interest in the project, and had indeed volunteered for interviews, few had been conducted. The efforts of rebuilding our community had sapped their time to the point that when push came to shove, the oral historians

were usually the first to be trimmed from a busy schedule.

Part of this problem had been met by a declaration from the president of the University of North Dakota, Kendall Baker. He had urged upon the Office of University Relations the task of memorializing the college effort in preserving the city. Accordingly, Jan Orvik from the aforementioned office had conducted approximately thirty-five interviews. She had also managed to gather all sorts of documentary and visual evidence of the flood. Not the least among her gatherings were the fifty-two rolls of film taken by UND First Lady Toby Baker. We soon found ourselves engaged in a collaborative effort not only with the university’s oral historian, but also with researchers associated with the Minnesota State Historical Society and Moorhead State University.²⁶

As the classroom reclaimed the majority of volunteers in late August, the looming question was simply “What now?” It seemed clear that much remained to be done: local residents, business leaders, city officials, the elderly, the minority communities, rural dwellers, etc., had not been thoroughly interviewed. It seemed equally clear that people had learned of our project and were eager to be interviewed; phone calls, emails, and letters became a flood in themselves. As we had initially assumed, people needed to tell their stories.

The solution to continuing the project came in two forms. As previously mentioned, many involved in the initial oral history project were associated

with the University of North Dakota. With only the slightest of efforts, many of us found ways to unofficially incorporate the project’s continuation into our coursework. Students from around the campus found themselves with similar assignments. Accordingly, students in history, social work, geography, sociology, and English hit the interviewing trail. And while freely admitting that not all of the work submitted that first semester was of the highest caliber, the students frequently ferreted out interviewees who had slipped through our structure. The students were especially good at interviewing compliant grandparents and fellow fraternity and sorority members. The interviews did not necessarily reach the highest level, but they did provide publicity and a wider scope.

Our collection has been utilized by the Red Cross, World Vision, FEMA, and untold others to discover proven routes to recovery.

guest presentations, it became clear to all that our tale of recovery had broad interest. Accordingly, when one of the city’s plethora of committees posed the question, “Who’s recording the history of the flood?,” volunteers associated with the summer project could provide an answer. Moreover, the answer we provided was in the form of a grant request.

The city also urged cooperation from its employees and requested various departments to make duplicate copies of all pertinent flood documents available to our researchers. While a bit outside our purview, it only made sense to have our interviewers gather paperwork as they traveled to collect oral history. Along the way to recording the voices of the flood, we became the clearing house for the city’s collective memory. By the close of the official project, representatives of the Elwyn B. Robinson Department

of Special Collections of University of North Dakota’s Chester Fritz Library paid a visit to my office. They collected untold FEMA reports, free T-shirts, aid-worker baseball caps, city council minutes and memoranda, Red Cross handouts, Salvation Army pamphlets, flood plain maps, and assorted correspondence. Piles of photographs, videos, and printed material made the trip across campus as well, available to all for use in understanding the flood that swept Grand Forks in April 1997.

It is unlikely that the memorialization of the flood will be completed in anyone’s lifetime. Individuals still inquire about the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood (1889), the San Francisco earthquake (1906), and the Galveston hurricane (1900). When the “ultimate” story of the disaster is told, beyond the ephemera will be the voices of approximately four hundred individuals on nearly eight hundred hours of tape. These numbers do not include student projects undertaken in the fall of 1997 UND classes, or those undertaken by high school students throughout the community, or the mini-interviews conducted at summer celebrations. We have also been the beneficiary of approximately seven hundred hours of local radio coverage—oral history of another sort.

Looking back on the project from the distance of two decades, I would offer the following “lessons learned” to those contemplating oral history in a natural disaster. First, try to avoid the disaster; paperwork and reconstruction woes cannot offset the joys of preserving an event. If you do, however, endure the wrath of nature, I would suggest that first and foremost is the need for stout-hearted people determined to salvage the best from their community. Forward-thinking leaders are crucial. No doubt aided in part by the fact that the North Dakota Museum of Art sustained only minor damage, this allowed Laurel Reuter, its director, to turn the community’s attention to the importance of art in its myriad forms mid-disaster.

The larger help to the project came in the form of city assistance. As summer turned to fall, and many of our city leaders found themselves not only well on the road to recovery but also on the road to innumerable

interviewed, and also had a series of questions they wanted answered. In particular, the city was interested in the decision-making process, the passing of information, and the levels of communication within the city both immediately before and immediately following our disaster. Given that many of the suggested questions had already been posed, and that many of the recommended subjects were on our initial “wish list,” the cost/benefit ratio seemed minor at the time. It remains so in my estimation.²⁷

While I will freely admit the services of more professionals would have contributed to the quality of the project, the sheer numbers of volunteers made the project work—and work in a situation where speed was of the essence. Had not we hit the streets early and with a concern for the volunteers who had so briefly come to our assistance, the stories of horrified news personnel and disaster response officials would have been lost. To my knowledge, Grand Forks was the first natural disaster of significant magnitude to begin recording oral history so soon after the event.

I also believe the use of mini-interviews at public celebrations was beneficial. While they did not offer the opportunity to go into great depth on a topic, they did provide the opportunity to gather reflections on specific issues. The short interview process also allowed us to publicize our efforts and to gain the names, and confidence, of individuals who had significant stories to tell.

I would also tell those gathering oral reflections in the aftermath of a natural disaster to be prepared for emotional turmoil. Stories of the evacuation, the devastation, the loss of homes, and the loss of friends did not touch only the life of the interviewed. All of the volunteers themselves had been through much of the same roil of emotions. Indeed, for a limited number of our volunteers, the process of rehashing the flood was overwhelming. Along this same avenue, a social worker once told me that the oral history project served a significant need in the community.²⁸

The collection is a treasure trove of material illustrating the economics, leadership roles, and communication channels of a natural disaster. It also contains magnificent, personal insight on gender and generational responses in a period of devastating distress. And while it tells of our bright and shining moments, the collection also

provides commentary on our darker side; domestic violence, child neglect, truancy, alcoholism, suicide, and drug abuse have all come to light.

The immediacy of the recordings is powerful and poignant. While some individuals undoubtedly embroidered their experiences, my own feeling is that the vast majority of the recordings reflect the integrity of the experience. Our city has laid bare its soul for the generations of scholars who will reflect upon our tragedy within their individual disciplines. The collection also offers communities in disaster the benefit of our experience. The learning curve of recovery is rather steep. No community should face such devastation and be forced to respond from scratch. Our collection has been utilized by the Red Cross, World Vision, FEMA, and untold others to discover proven routes to recovery.

The flood of 1997 was quite frankly the most horrifying experience of my life. And although I remember scowling, and perhaps even snarling, at a far too chipper and way too clean evacuation center volunteer, her words ring true two decades following the event: “Something good will come from this, you wait and see.”



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At UND she focuses her attention on United States history, including the “History of North Dakota” course. Porter edited *The Oral History Review* for six years. She is currently engaged in researching/writing a biography of Henry Field, an Iowa-based entrepreneur.

ENDNOTES

1. A longstanding rumor proclaims the forced evacuation of Grand Forks in the latter days of April 1997 was the most complete one since the residents of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, fled with the arrival of the Union and Confederate forces during July 1863. While such an image may be comforting in its bravado, it is most certainly more fiction than fact. Clearly more individuals flee coastal hurricanes and do so more completely than the residents of Grand Forks. Equally sharp military examples can be called upon to illustrate that the comparison to Gettysburg is overdrawn.
2. Questions regarding the validity of history written by those who have experienced an event, or who live within historic times, have been plentiful. Some have offered that the experience of the event does indeed temper the work produced—but does so in a way that, if critically conducted, allows for deeper understanding of the event. See Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: The Case for Local History* (University of California Press, 2002); Richard Davies, Joseph Amato, and David Pichaske, eds., *A Place Called Home: Writings on the Midwestern Small Town* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003); David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past around You* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Peter Catterall, “What (If Anything) Is Distinctive about Contemporary History?,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 4 (1997): 450; and Michael D. Kandiah, “Contemporary History,” *Making History*, accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/contemporary_history.html.
3. The North Dakota Museum of Art, located on the campus of the University of North Dakota, was founded by Laurel Reuter, who remains its director. Via her foresight, this oral history project was underway even before the streets of Grand Forks had been cleared of debris. Her talent at grant writing sustained the project for two years and ultimately left the community of Grand Forks with a treasure trove of history, oral history, artistic interpretations, dramatic performances, etc.
4. Laurel Reuter, “Helping Your Neighbors,” *Grand Forks Herald*, May 26, 1997, B6.
5. Laurel Reuter, e-mail message to author, August 16, 2016.
6. Ibid.
7. See Frances Ford’s one-woman, fifteen-character play *Flood of Memories*; Eric Hylden and Laurel Reuter, eds., *Under*

- the Whelming Tide* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art, 1998). A display of the same name was on exhibit at the North Dakota Museum of Art from June 14 to July 27, 1998. Mary Lucier produced *Flood Songs*, a video installation for the museum, and Barton Benes collected small items found in the debris to produce a reliquary.
8. Eliot Glassheim, in discussion with the author, June 1997, Grand Forks, ND.
 9. The “Angel,” McDonald’s heir Joan Kroc, set up a fund to provide each economically damaged Grand Forks/East Grand Forks household with funds from \$500 to \$2,000.
 10. Kimberly K. Porter, *Legacy in the Sand: The United States Armament, Munitions and Chemical Command in Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield* (Rock Island, IL: GPO, 1992).
 11. Glassheim, discussion.
 12. On the benefits of oral history as therapy for the narrator see Willa Baum, “Therapeutic Value of Oral History,” *International Journal of Aging and Human Developmental* 12, no. 1 (January 1981): 49–53; Wendy Rickard, “Oral History—‘More Dangerous than Therapy’?: Interviewees’ Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo Issues,” *Oral History* 26, no. 2 (Autumn 1998): 34–48; and Robert W. Menninger, “Some Psychological Factors Involved in Oral History Interviewing,” *Oral History Review* 3, no. 1 (1975): 68–75. For the potential benefits to the interviewers themselves see Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa,” *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 55–79; and Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
 13. See Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge and Chapman, 1991) for a discussion of the value of a shared experience in producing better interviews, with the caveat that the interviewer must remain at a critical distance. The vast majority of recent texts on oral history make note of the significance of the relationship of the narrator/interviewer in producing a more nuanced recording. This can involve a veteran knowing the appropriate questions to ask regarding battle, a woman asking another woman about sexual assault, or an individual of a particular race pursuing knowledge of incidents related to discrimination. A common experience generally makes for an easier beginning to a potentially difficult discussion.
 14. The North Dakota Museum of Art hosted *Under the Whelming Tide* from June 14 to July 27, 1998.
 15. Over the summer, organizations from throughout the United States came to Grand Forks to offer food, entertainment, cleaning skills, emotional sustenance, and the like. Besides a multitude of churches that made an appearance, so did assorted food services. One, Texas Lil’s Barbeque, arrived in town in the midst of the city-wide clean up and prepared beef barbeque for hundreds who cheerfully waited in one more line and sat in UND’s Memorial Stadium with their baked beans, beef, and cups of soda. In its own effort at returning to normalcy, late in the summer of 1997, the city of Grand Forks sponsored a celebration of the wheat harvest with the “Grand Pasta Party on the Prairie.” With the large number of individuals who wandered the street fair associated with the Pasta Party, a small booth was set up to ask targeted questions of those who stopped to visit. Questions as to the hardest thing to lose, the last thing grabbed from the house, personal heroes/heroines, etc., were asked.
 16. Allan Nevins, father of the American oral history movement, once noted that he read the obituary columns with dread, understanding that with each passing day “knowledge valuable to the historian, novelist, sociologist, and economist was perishing; memories perishing forever without yielding any part of their riches.” Allan Nevins, untitled article, *Wilson Library Bulletin* 60 (March 1966): 600–01. Similarly, British historian George Ewart Evans wrote in the same vein: “Tomorrow may be too late; and once this knowledge is under the soil no amount of digging will ever again recover it.” George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows that Cut the Hay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 14.
 17. Individuals who conducted interviews include Eliot Glassheim, Kimberly K. Porter, Wes Christensen, Ian Swanson, Marcia Harris, Ron Vossler, Erik Williamson, John Little, Madelyn Camrud, Kathy Coudle King, Jim McKenzie, Jane Varley, Barbara Crow, Lisa Lewis Spicer, Jenny Tarlin Ettlting, Kitty Maidenberg, Jean Anderson, Mary Jo Schill, Jennifer Bottinelli, Dyan Rey, and Emily Buchanan. Undoubtedly others participated, and for their absence from this list, I apologize.
 18. LaVonne Swenson, interview by the author, July 23, 1997, Grand Forks, ND, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota (hereafter UND), Grand Forks. See as well Sonia Hovet, interview by Barbara Crow, September 25, 1997, Grand Forks, ND, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND. Hovet was a niece of the Swensons.
 19. Mike Sande, interview by the author, February 19, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 20. Leonard and Marilyn Kouba, interview by the author, April 13, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 21. Michael Maidenberg, interview by John Little, undated, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND; Michael Maidenberg, interview by the author, January 19, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 22. Lannie Runck, interview by the author, April 7, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND. This story was confirmed by Grand Forks postmaster Gloria Hauge, interview by the author, May 19, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND. Neither Runck nor Hauge identified the family involved.
 23. William Sherman, interview by Wes Christenson, December 27, 1997, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 24. Rebecca Metzger, interview by the author, May 19, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 25. Tim Fought, interview by Marcia Harris, November 30, 1997, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.
 26. Jan Orvik and Dick Larson, *The Return of Lake Agassiz: The University of North Dakota and the Flood of 1997* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota, 1998). The tapes and transcripts are in the possession of Orvik and Larson.
 27. Two books came from this interviewing experience. See Eliot Glassheim, Kimberly K. Porter, and Robin Silverman, eds., *Behind the Scenes: The 1997 Flood of the Red River of the North* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art, 2002); and Kimberly K. Porter, *Uncommon Heroes: The City of Grand Forks Flood Fight, 1997* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Museum of Art, 2001).
 28. Barbara Kramer, interview by the author, April 7, 1998, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, UND.