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Flood Interview Pt. 1 Walley

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Notes:

A man begins speaking on the recording saying that this is the second in a series of interviews with people in the Fairbanks area who had significance roles to play in the Fairbanks Flood. Bill Walley says he is the operations manager at KFAR Radio and TV and Fairbanks Councilman and Bureau Assemblyman. The interviewer asks Walley when he was aware of a serious flood threat. Walley says no one was really aware of flood threats until there was water in the homes. He says in the broadcast media they were taking the weather bureau's forecast as late as 1 in the morning Tuesday morning and at that time it was believed that the crest of flooding was 15 feet. He said after a while they started playing it by ear an inch at a time because the river kept flooding. He says the flood coverage started on Sunday when he went to the Salcha River to cover the breakthrough on the Richardson Highway. He said he brought his wife and children along with Councilman John Hubert to check the water out. They got out there and it was a terrifying sight on the other side of the new bridge. Walley says they were cut off at the Aurora Lodge because one of the bridges on the other side had washed away partially. He said he had to take his children on his back to get back to an automobile on the other side to get into town. He said there was a feeling of relief on Monday because they thought the flooding would recede. At three o'clock in the morning, they were called on to the Nenana situation and had to come to work to help out with the civil defense station. They stayed on the air from 3 am to 10 am, giving out evacuation notices. He says after reporting they went out in one of the remote cars just driving around the area still with the feeling that there was going to be water. They continued to do that until the television show that night in which they did a program about the flooding. Walley says the water was all the way up to the bottom of the Cushman St. Bridge and people didn't think it was going to get much higher than that. Walley lived on Hilton St. and he had stopped by his house before he went on his TV show around Hilton and Weeks Field [?]. Walley and his wife were kidding and joking about water coming down Hilton St. When he came back after the TV show there was water on Hilton and she decided she was going to catch a plane to Seattle. He says he was going to go check Airport Rd. and Walley put his wife on the airplane. He said that the water had grown considerably on Airport Rd. He went to the downtown area and decided to go toward KFAR on Second Avenue. There was no water on Second Avenue. He went down Cowles St. and turned right on 7th Avenue and ran into a wall of water. He did some waiting and went back to his car. By that time all of the radio personnel on KFAR had been in contact with him through the remote controls. The station manager Don Andin was stationed right downtown and found himself blocked in the downtown area. At 6:45 into the recording he asks the interviewer if he wants him to stop and the interviewer says no he just wants to get the time of all of the events. Walley says the times are going to be difficult because no one was asking what time it was. Mr. Andin told them at

around 11 o'clock. A place that was still high during the flood was a Chevron gas station across the street from Tiny's Pancake House. Walley says that he asked all the radio personnel to meet at the Chevron station. They did all meet and were making plans with the consensus that the water was going to stop. Mr. Andin [Don] said over the radio that water was poring over to Second Avenue and to Lathrop basement where the station power was. Walley says they knew right away they had to figure a way to broadcast. Don made a comment about the transmitter on Farmer's Loop Rd. was the station's only hope. They started making quick assignments. Don's wife was about to have a baby so he had to leave for a moment or two. Walley's car did not run anymore so everyone split up into teams. Himself and Jerry Springer went to the transmitter and they heard it was difficult to get there from University Avenue and it was. Walley put Lee and Bobby Parson in a remote car and they knew that Don Andin would be back on Second Avenue in a matter of moments. Lee [No last name] and Bob [No last name] headed for the downtown area and Jerry [Springer] and Wally [No last name, possibly City Manager Droze] headed to the KFAR transmitter. Something happened to Jerry's radio unit so they lost contact for a moment at the same time KFAR radio went off the air when the water hit the transformer in the basement of the KFAR station. When he was out at the airport, Don had issued an order for the engineers to go out to the transmitter and Walley didn't know that. The ride was terrifying across the University Avenue Bridge. Walley got on Farmer's Loop it was like finding an island. They were more excited when they found the engineering staff was there. An old generator had been rigged up for civil defense purposes but hadn't been tested in several years. Walley and his crew found that there wasn't enough gas for the generator to run. At that time they were off the air for about 10 minutes. When they got to the transmitter there was just one microphone. Jerry Springer and Walley went immediately on the air. They had a phone that worked for about an hour. The engineer's wives and children were there. The first nine hours they just talked. The phone was rigged up to a car radio and they were in contact with downtown units and they used car speakers. Mr. Andin got into contact along with Lee Russell who stayed on the bridge. Bobby Parsons was downtown. They found a turntable and played records and people from the hill brought records. The music helped break the monotony of continuous emergency reporting. He says the music was a welcome relief at times.

The Interviewer says that as he remembers it, Monday and Tuesday Walley kept mentioning they were on emergency status. Walley says the situation being deemed an emergency was directly from the FCC. Walley said the station became a center to bring communication for the general public. They had radio communication with Civil Defense and everyone started heading for the high ground. He says they were estimating about 14,000-15,000 people on the high grounds. Dr. Wood came to the station several times and helped in the evacuation of the people to the university. The mayor and civil defense brought the Red Cross director out to the high ground station and the station sent up a hospital at KFAR. The interviewer asks Walley what kind of communication KFAR had with the defense agency and if it was constant communication. Walley says there were gaps of information between all the agencies. Walley says that most of Civil Defense and their agencies are set up primarily for all types of general disasters, but flood is the one disaster they are less set up for because most of the equipment is put into basements. The primary gap for communication breakthrough was the difficulty in understanding what people are saying across radios. Walley says that many people took on authority that they didn't have before the flood. The Fairbanks Public Works Department had a number of their people stranded at the

University of Alaska-Fairbanks. The interviewer asks when the Salvation Army first contacted KFAR. Walley says he doesn't know the exact time, but the Salvation Army was the first to have food for people at the University. He says both the Salvation Army and Red Cross were outstanding. He says there was a lag as far as actions goes because it was impossible to move when there was that much water around. The interviewer asks what kind of assistance Walley could have been to helping evacuate people. Walley says they helped evacuate Island Homes. Some of the other areas may not have been evacuated in time because of communication breakdown. In some areas people couldn't be evacuated because the water came so fast. They don't know why water was rushing to Hamilton Acres. Most times the Chena River is a slow rising type thing and this time it wasn't. The weather advisory came from the Anchorage Weather Bureau and Walley says he understands that state legislature move the job of forecasting weather from Anchorage to Fairbanks.

At 22:00 Walley says they started out with five mobile units [cars]. They ended up with two or three. Don Andin's personal car started floating and it sank. Walley's car was out of service at first but they got it back in service. Steve's car and Jerry's car were also still working. After a while the water started dictating where the remote units would be. Eventually they found out that the parking lot of the NC Company was one of the highest spots. Walley says in general at the high peak in water everyone sat tight in the NC parking lot. For a while the only way they had to tell whether the water was going up or down was a mark that Don Andin put on a building downtown. The interviewer asks Walley how he views his role as a radio station during an emergency like the flood of 1967. Walley says his role was to do everything possible to help as many people you can. He says Jerry Springer gave typhoid shots and Walley passed out cases of food and some women were taking care of babies. He says it was difficult to check the authenticity of everything. There was a rat problem at the transmitter and wondered if they should have done that because they didn't know if it was a rat problem around the entire hill.