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Harry Jeffrey interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection

Harry Jeffrey

Jeff Moyer

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
1913 Dayton Flood Oral Survivors Histories (MS-296)

Interview Date: July 19, 1996

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Harry Jeffrey

JM: What I thought I'd do is I, I'd ask you a few questions first and then as I told you I was hoping to uh...you would uh read your essay for us.

HJ: Whatever you say.

JM: Okay.

HJ: I'm not familiar with this kind of stuff.

JM: Right. Right. So if you'll just uh continue to just look at me while we're doing this.

HJ: Like we're talking and stuff.

JM: Right. Right. Indeed. Just like uh like people used to sit across your desk at...all through your career. Well um I guess Mr. Jeffrey I just like to, to uh tell me your name and give me a little bit of your background please.

HJ: My name is Harry Jeffrey and I was born right here in Dayton and uh went to Ohio State to College of Liberal Arts and then to the law school here and practiced law in Dayton for sixty-five years.

JM: Is that right?

HJ: Yeah. And I enjoyed every minute of it.

JM: Um what kind of law did you practice?

HJ: Well it was general but my specialty was trial of cases which I like to be in court. And that was more fun than going to a party.

JM: What was some of your most inter...well one of your most interesting cases?

HJ: Most interesting case? Most interesting civil case uh a woman was burned over fifty-five percent of her body in a gas explosion in a Hoover uh Huber house out in uh south of town here. And uh we filed suit against the Dayton Power and Light Company and the contractors and got

the biggest verdict that had ever been returned because it was unusual for a person who had been burned over more than fifty-percent of their body to even survive, she did and underwent numerous operations and ended up with keloid flesh on her arms and legs but she survived and uh we got a big verdict for which she deserved.

JM: Yeah.

HJ: Uh civilly, that was the most interesting case. Criminally, I represented the Vice President of Sales for the Loral Corporation of New York City who was accused of bribing a uh Wright State... Wright Patterson Air Force Procurement Officer. He was uh not the nicest client I ever had but the most interesting case because the FBI was on the other side. But all cases are interesting.

JM: Right. Right.

HJ: Yeah.

JM: Well let's talk a little about um, um your childhood. Um, um what was your neighborhood like before the flood? What could you tell me about that?

HJ: Well of course, the uh, we didn't have suburbs in those days, you lived downtown and the house that I lived in during the flood uh was within a mile of Third and Main Street, 835 South Main Street. And the streetcar ran there, you took the streetcar and walked downtown. The...I had a... I lived with my parents and a brother and a sister and it was fortunately a brick house cause when the flood came there was fire all around us, in frame houses. And thank goodness that brick house survived. But it was a very different day then, then now. 1913 is seventy odd years ago.

JM: What was your neighborhood like?

HJ: Modest homes uh a couple of apartment houses but mostly they were individual homes in those days rather than apartment houses. Although when the flood came, you could hear an explosion uh gas leaked and then somebody struck a match or something and away it went. It was it was a home...a neighborhood of modest homes.

JM: And um, um what were your neighbors like? You remember their ethnic background and and and that kind of thing?

HJ: Well I think they were pretty generally what uh the neighborhood was in Dayton at that time, there were Germans, there were Irish uh just happens that uh my ancestry is Scots and English uh, uh so it was pretty general. We didn't have uh, uh we didn't have the uh, uh the foreign group that lived in north Dayton at that time. But it was uh English and Irish and German.

JM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um let's move on, you know let's talk about the flood a little bit later but what do you remember about your neighborhood after the flood, when you returned to your house?

HJ: Well we lived there for about a year and a half and as fast as we could we got out of there and moved to higher grounds my parents didn't want any more uh floods. So that um when you came back to the house which we did about six months later it was all new furniture because the furniture had to be thrown away. And the uh neighborhood was cleaned up; it looked much like it did before the houses that is. Although some of them that were burned down and not rebuilt right away. It was uh a devastating effect on that and all of Day...all of Dayton that was in the flood there at that time.

JM: Did you um or your family know of anybody who uh um unfortunately passed away during the flood?

HJ: Oh yes. A, a young man about my age that was uh a friend of my brother's and mine was killed in an explosion half a block away in an apartment house. Yes we did...unfortunately.

JM: What kind of affect did that have on you as such a young person?

HJ: Oh by the time we got back there to that neighborhood which was six months after the flood itself, we had lived elsewhere for the six months while we were cleaning that up. The effect has pretty well worn off uh but it's an experience that you, you just never forgot. Uh I, I was able when I was in school ten years later, I was able to write about it because uh an experience like that burns into your uh self in a way that you don't forget it. It isn't that we mourn the loss of anyone in particular it was just, just a devastating experience.

JM: Mm. How did the flood change things?

HJ: Well course the, the flood brought Dayton together and then uh you may or may not know they built those dams which prevented an incident. I want to emphasize that those dams were built with local money no federal money went into those dams like they do today. It brought Dayton together. It was a boost to Dayton. It was a boost to John Patterson who I thought was never properly recognized for all that he did for Dayton especially during that flood.

JM: During the flood, um did you see John Patterson?

HJ: I saw him after the flood.

JM: I see.

HJ: Yes. John...My, my grandfather was dead. My maternal grandfather but he had known John Patterson. And uh when they rescued us and took us out to the NCR uh Mr. Patterson recognized my grandmother and uh let us see...live that summer in one of his so called summer homes for his executives. And I can remember him on horseback riding up to the house where we were and saying, "How are you getting along" and so forth. He was a uh renescent man, not very talkative

but instinctively he impressed you with his moustache and on horseback as he rode around there. I'll never forget him as a figure.

JM: Um well let's talk about the days of the flood. Where were you when, when you were first made aware that the flood was coming?

HJ: Well my brother and I were uh in bed asleep in our second floor bedroom. And my mother came up and awakened us and got us out of bed and said uh instead of the seat, the street down there that you're so familiar with you're going to see water running through that street so we hastily put on some clothes and went down the stairs and instead of looking down the street, we saw a river running through our front yard. It was uh it was quite a [unknown] for a couple of kids that age at that start it was kind of fun but the fun soon evaporated. We probably would have left the house uh earlier in the day but my sister who was uh see she was about fourteen then. She was bedfast with a broken leg and it would have been very difficult to leave and of course we wouldn't have left her. So we stayed in the house but uh the uh... at the start we... it was kind of silly... later we propped up some smaller furniture on something like a couch... pretty soon of course the water got up to the point where it was within inches of the second floor, so all we did when we were up there on the second floor was hear the furniture bumping around down on the first floor with that flood water. And it was cold, you couldn't uh strike a match, you couldn't have any warm food. My mother of course took some food and water upstairs when we went...

[The video goes out at 00:11:13, but the audio continues. Video returns at 00:11:43.]

HJ: [Inaudible] [Laughing]

Background voice: Thirty seconds down

Background voice: Is that okay John?

Background voice: Yes

JM: Just going to ask you a couple more que...

[Video cuts back in at 00:11:43.]

JM: Okay so tell me a little bit about how you prepared once the water started rising, before you moved to the second floor.

HJ: Well we started to move small furniture up on to the larger pieces of furniture, but that was all in vain, because the water rose to within inches of the second floor. During the afternoon and during the daylight hours, they attempted to rescue our family, that is a couple of firemen and a boat. And because my brother and I were the smallest and the lightest, they lowered us from a second floor window on a blanket into the fireman's boat, but the current was so swift, that the firemen decided that that was no go. My mother, I can see her, she was leaning out that window. She said drop us in the water. But they took us back and they dropped the blanket again and took us back in the second floor window. Then as night came on, it was just black; just a black out.

You can't imagine how black everything was, until a fire started, two doors or three doors down the street and something blew up. Then there was an explosion and a lot of fireworks and then you see that fire burning. And fire burned on three sides of it and people got into our house because it was a brick house and fortunately it did survive the fire. We never caught fire, but before morning came, instead of just our family in that house there must have been 15, 20 people in there who had been crawled in from some of these houses that had exploded. One thing that was interesting, a man passed with his small baby child strapped to his back on a sheet and he went over the wires, hand over hand and foot over foot over that water and got out that way. But for the most part, people stayed in their houses. But during the night, we were children of course, we dozed off. I'm sure our parents never did. When the morning came Mr. Patterson had flat cars run down on a few railroad tracks as far as the water's edge. Then his workmen somehow - and I don't know how, I was a child - They built a sort of pontoon bridge over to our house and got us out that way. Then a couple of good strong men came over that pontoon bridge into our house and they grabbed my brother and I and... So we said we aren't going unless we take our dog with us. So the workmen were a little upset with that, they had enough on their hands at that point. But anyhow they let us take our dog and they got us out over that pontoon and they brought my sister over and my mother and my father and the rest of these people and took us out to the NCR where we were staged out there.

JM: Let me ask you one more question about the night when the fire was around your house and all those people joined you. What methods did people get from those burning houses to your place?

HJ: How did they get there?

JM: Yeah.

HJ: Some of them were in a house next door on either side and they got over there on pieces of furniture or pieces of wood that floated over to our house. I didn't see any of that, I was told that. But they go over there by float over there, that's what it amounted to.

JM: I see. So they actually entered the water to get to your house?

HJ: Yes.

JM: Alright. Let's talk a little bit about once you got rescued. What was it like at NCR? How many days were you there? Let's start off there.

HJ: Well we were only there during that first day and then Mr. Patterson had us taken out to this summer house at one of his executives where we stayed all summer long, thank goodness and we were very fortunate to be able to do that. And that enabled my parents to get the house cleaned up, before we got back into it.

JM: So what building were you in at the NCR grounds?

HJ: Oh, yeah that was the big office building that was ten stories high and during the course of that day after we were rescued, we took the elevator up there and looked out over the city and looked out over the place we had come from, which was most interesting.

JM: Can you describe some of the activity that was going on at NCR?

HJ: It was a madhouse. They were rescuing people, they were giving people something to eat, and arranging to have them sleep on wherever they were doing it in many places I presume. But it was just a, well a madhouse is too strong a word. It was just a maelstrom of activity with people, people, people. Most of them very happy, like were to get away from that water, mainly.

JM: Before I have you read this, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about in matters of the flood?

HJ: No I think that when we got back, our parents of course went through the agony of cleaning that muck and mud and debris and everything else. They had to throw a piano and mattresses, clothing, everything that was in the flood had to be discarded. So that once we got back it was all fairly nice and clean, but I must say that we were all glad to get into a house a far distance from the flood area and high on top of a hill.

JM: And where did you move to?

HJ: We moved to a house on Longsdale Avenue in Oakwood. In fact it was the first house built on that plat and we moved there in the summer of '15 and at that time the streetcar, the Oakwood streetcar, ran just a couple blocks farther south. You had to turn around. You went downtown on a nickel.

JM: I remember another one I was going to ask you. What did your father do for a living?

HJ: My father worked in retail stores in downtown Dayton, practically all of his life and I don't know why, but I think I wanted to be a lawyer from the time I was in high school. So fortunately I was able to do it and was able to practice and enjoyed it for many - 65 years to be exact and now I'm retired and wish I weren't. [Laughing]

JM: You want to get back in the fray, huh?

HJ: Yes.

JM: Your father, is there in any other retail stores we might recognize where he worked?

JM: Oh yes. He worked in Hunter and Hardie's which is long since gone. He worked in Johnson Shelton. He worked in Rike's. It was then called Rike-Kumler. When I was a small child, there were four department stores in downtown Dayton within a couple of blocks. Now we temporarily, at least have one. [laughing]

JM: Right. Yeah, let's hope it sticks around.

HJ: Yes.

JM: Okay. Would you like to take a break and take a drink of water before I have you read this?

HJ: Yes I would.

JM: Okay. Greg stop the tape please. We'll just turn this off for a second.

[Video cuts off then back on again, apparently a few minutes later.]

JM: Anytime you'd like to start, go ahead.

HJ: I was enrolled in the Liberal Arts College at Ohio State University. I was in my Junior year and I enrolled in a class of advanced English composition and Professor Billy Graves was the instructor and he told us to write something from childhood memory. Well the thing that stuck out in my memory of course, was my flood experience and this is what I wrote:

HJ: [reading] Childhood Recollections: About six o'clock on the morning of March 23rd, 1913, my mother awakened my brother Don and me. We were told that the water was beginning to rise to the level of the front terrace. We hurried into our clothes and rushed downstairs. The basement was full of water and the street, as by magic, had become a river overnight. A river of dirty water on whose surface floated all sorts of nondescript articles, but to a small boy, it was all a wonderful adventure. Never before had I seen men wading about in the streets, in water hip-high. How I wished too, that I were a six footer. in hip boots. My father immediately secured a supply of provisions. No one expected the water to come much higher, yet he wanted to be prepared for a siege. However that dirty, greenish flood. slowly, steadily crept higher and higher. It soon became evident that the first floor of the house would be invaded. I think that I never labored so untiringly as during those next few hours. Everything which could be carried was taken to the second floor. Up and down stairs, we ran, but in the excitement of the moment, we were heedless of fatigue. We managed to hoist the piano; a unwieldy baby grand on carpenter's horses and were proud to have accomplished so much. In the end, the water prevailed and bidding as a rather sheepish goodbye, the lady who worked for us waded right out into the water and struck for the hills. By noon the novelty was waning off, especially in the site of our parents. They began to exchange glances full of meaning. In my mother's dark blue eyes, there lurked a shadow in spite of her outward cheerfulness. The level of the water had now risen until half of the lower floor was full. But not only had the flood increased in volume, the speed of the current had increased correspondingly. Early in the morning it had moved slowly and lazily, but like the ever increasing speed of a locomotive, this current had gradually turned into a rushing mill race. The front of our house squarely faced the water, which parted and tore around on either side, in its sad course. My grandmother and an uncle were visiting us at the time. I believe we would have made a belated attempt to leave the house, but for the fact that my sister was confined to a bed with a broken leg. My parents feared to move her, for the limb had not yet been placed in a cast. Then the water had risen before and had never done serious damage. Our house was of the old, substantial brick type and was situated at the bottom of a steep hill. In fact, we were so close to dry land on the south, we could look out and see the throng of curious watchers at the summit of

the hill. Efforts to rescue the families on the street were being made. Canoes, rowboats attempted to reach us, but the current was so swift as to render such efforts fruitless. About 2 o'clock in the afternoon, my mother fried eggs and ham on a little gas plate, but as I recall now, Don and I my brother were the only ones who really ate. We did not fully realize the dangers and the responsibility did not rest upon our shoulders. Soon after this a boat passed the house full of people. A great, powerful gray horse swam after it. He attempted to swim close to the boat, but each time he approached, the man in the stern dealt him a blow on the head with an oar. His fright impelled him draw closer to that solid object. Yet had he succeeded, he would surely have capsized the frail craft. The men in the boat attempted to pull through the current on their way to the hill, but manpower could avail nothing against that merciless rush of water. The boat was driven downstream, but fortunately hit a house into which the occupants were pulled. That great fine horse however, which had struggled so nobly, was sucked along with the current and disappeared from view. At this juncture, a boat maned by two firemen succeeded in reaching our house. It was decided by the firemen, with the aid of my father and uncle, should try to take the boat through the current to the hill. Since my brother and I were the smallest and lightest, it was thought best to make the first attempt with us. We were lowered from a second story window into the boat, by means of a blanket and the pull for the hill began. My mother leaning far out of the window never took her eyes from the boat. Don and I were told to bail water. The minute we cleared the house, the boat seemed pulled a long by an unseen hand. All effort with the oars was futile. Indeed, we barely escaped being sucked down the stream and were thankful to be able to return to the house and be pulled into it on a blanket.

JM: Want to take a quick break and get a drink of water?

HJ: Yeah.

HJ: [Clears throat] Okay. [reading] Our plight was steadily getting worse. The rain fell incessantly and it was bitterly cold. No one dared to even strike a match, for fear of starting a fire. For by now the pungent odor of escaping gas filled the air. Less substantial free frame houses began to give way under the strain and were torn loose from their foundations. Barns, horses, furniture, automobiles, and articles of every imaginable description floated past the house in an endless stream. The feeling of adventure had long since left, but I was conscious of a sense of awe more than that of fear. I did not realize the many dangers which beset us. Our father and mother had always solved difficulties for us throughout my short life and my faith in their ability to do so now had not left me, but I remember of having been very quiet and subdued. In fact as I look back now, I realize that a sense of something unknown yet impending hung over all of us. So the afternoon wore away and darkness closed upon us. There was no fire to cheer us with its light and warmth. There was only black Stygian darkness, bitter penetrating cold, and rain; incessant unceasing, relentless rain. Shadows would have been welcome in that blackness. For we could barely distinguish each other halfway across the room. But even this did not prepare us for what was to come. We were all together in the north front room on the second floor. In such a crisis, the mere presence of others seemed to offer solace. My father would occasionally leave the room and pace nervously at the rear of the house. All sorts of desperate means of escape flitted through his brain, only to be abandoned and discarded. The water had now risen to within inches of the second floor. We could hear its steady swish as it milled around just a few inches

below us. Everyone's nerves were drawn tense. The incessant swish of the water below and the steady pounding of the flood without, seemed to measure the minutes, but oh so slowly.

JM: Let's take a break for a minute, because we're going to change tapes.

[Video cuts out from 00:31:30 until 00:31:58, but audio continues.]

JM: Did you get a drink of water?

HJ: Yeah.

JM: Okay, hang on just a minute and we'll be ready for you when this tape cues up. It takes just a second.

[Video returns at 00:31:58.]

HJ: [reading] Suddenly the terrifying report of a great explosion resounded above the raging of the storm and the waters. I believe no one in the room screamed aloud, but the noise of that explosion seared the consciousness of every single one of us, even Don and I, young as we were. We rushed to the windows in time to make out a great mass of wreckage hurled to the sky. Bricks were thrown a hundred yards. The large apartment house half a block away, had been blown up by a cause which will forever remain a mystery. Long tongues of flame immediately rose against the black skylines. The shrill screams of men, women, and children pierced the air. The building above the water lined surface, became a seething mass of flames. The building above the surface of the water had become totally inflamed, fanned by a strong wind from the north. The conflagration soon spread to neighboring houses. Four frame houses stood there in a row, and then there was only an open space and then our brick house. The occupants of those houses fled from one to the other over roofs and masses of floating wreckage. Search lights were soon played upon the scene by the watchers on the hill, so close yet powerless to render any aid. One man fastening his infant baby on his back in a sheet and with his wife following close behind, managed hand over hand on two squares of wire cables to the safety of the hill, but for the rest of the fugitives this was no means of escape. From there, this man succeeded in throwing a rope to my father and uncle who stood on the second floor of the balcony. Another rope soon followed. Clinging to one as a cable and dealt with the other tied about their bodies, 28 people were pulled into the house. All of them were completely drenched and stiff with the cold, but such discomforts were hardly noticed. In the minds of young and old alike, there was one question a foremost, one fear clutched at the hearts of all. Would that demon of fire reach this last haven of safety, if we were completely cut off from further retreat? Then began that terrible vigil of waiting. Burning pieces of wreckage floated about upon the surface of the water. The glare from the burning inferno approaching ever nearer gasp upon the walls and cast horrid shapes and figures. And yet my sister, unable to do so much as to sit up in bed, hearing those roaring waters and the weird crackling of burning timbers and seeing that fiendish red glare dance upon the walls and everywhere, never quivered nor uttered a sound. It all seemed so unreal, so unnatural. Trivial matters, a closet door left unclosed, seemed to attract attention. Yet the suspense seemed improbable. The last frame house caught fire from passing sparks. Preparations were made for everyone in the house to take to the water. Roofs were secured by

which we were to be fastened together. Among the thirty-odd people thrust by fate into one house that night, many religious creeds were represented, but all prayed to one end and ~~and~~ all prayed to the same great deliverer.

JM: Like some water?

HJ: Yes. [takes drink]

HJ: [reading] It seemed as though providence of the terrible crisis chose to intervene in our behalf. The direction of wind shifted and the flying sparks began to fall back into their own path of destruction. When the shift in the direction of the wind was recognized, there were wild shouts of joy. Our nerves had been strained far passed a point to which such a response would have been possible, but instead of shouts of joy there was silent prayers of thankfulness. As the night wore away, the flames flickered lower and lower. At three o'clock the flood began to recede ever so slowly. Then streaks of gray began to appear in the east, but that dawn did not seem cold and cheerless to the silent watchers in the house. Anything would have been a relief after the experience of that night, a night which had seemed an eternity; an experience which had been hewed deeply into the memories of all of us. The swiftness of the current had somewhat abated and a new effort to rescue us was being made from the hill. A line of boxcars was run down upon the streetcar tracks to the bottom of the hill. Using these as a basis, a rude sort of pontoon bridge was built and constructed to our house. By eleven o'clock that morning the work was completed and workmen stood ready to assist us to safety. Don and I carried with us our little dog throughout the night. Punch had never been allowed to stray from our side. The house was speedily deserted and we were all taken to the plant of the National Cash Registry Company. This institution, through the beneficence of its president, had been converted into a great relief station. Here we were given food and an opportunity to become warm once again. The office building of this plant is twelve stories high and my father, Don, and I went to the top floor to look out over the city. As we stood there we had a feeling of great relief after what we had suffered the night before. More than one fire had occurred the previous night. Smoke and smoldering ruins still told their tale. We looked down at our own home, at the ruins so near and then were glad to turn away from our recent experiences. It was like awakening from a bad dream which had left impressions too vivid to be shaken off.

HJ: And that was my recollection ten years later [laughing] as a student far away.

JM: So how does that make you feel reading that piece now?

HJ: It brings back potent memories, believe me. I can see it. I can see that fire, I can see those floating, burning pieces of furniture and what not. Yes it's an experience that you never forget.

JM: Anything else you'd like to tell me, sir?

HJ: I'm glad we have the dams so we're not going to have any recurrence of that, which was built by local efforts, with the inspiration of John Patterson. Yes.

JM: Sir, I think we're done. I really appreciate you doing this.

HJ: Fine.

JM: [to someone in background] Yes, yes ma'm.

HJ: See if I can get a copy of that. I'll be glad to pay for it.

JM: Oh that will not be a problem, we'll certainly get you a copy.

HJ: Send it to my granddaughter for her.. I have three great-grandchildren I would like...

[Video and audio ends]