

Call Number: 02-00-59

Flood Interview – George Solli

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Notes:

George Solli introduces himself and says he works for the Institute of Marine Science at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. During the flood of last August Solli says he did work with a boat. The interviewer asks Solli when it became clear to him that Fairbanks was facing a major flood. Solli says his neighbor woke him up at 4 am Tuesday morning the 14th of August. At that time the water was just starting to flow down the street in front of Solli's house. Solli says that everything the people had heard on the radio and on television from the night before was "completely erroneous." Solli says the media's statement that the crest of the river was 40-50 miles upriver and the prediction that it would crest at midnight was completely false. Solli says the flooding of the area he lives in was a good 4-5 feet higher. Solli says he got his neighbor's wife and child out of their house across the street. By 6 am the water was coming into the basement of the Solli household. Solli says it was quite easy at that time to drive across the railroad tracks and across the slough [Noyes] and onto University Avenue. He dropped his family off with some other people and continued on the rest of the day until 11 pm Tuesday night, when he was helping people get out of their homes and onto the UAF campus. Solli's area of focus was in the Aurora area. He was there most of the day, afternoon and evening. Solli says he was helping people get out of the Lemeta area. At about 9 pm he went and registered with the Fairbanks Police Department. Solli says he had no contact with anyone in authority. The contact with the Fairbanks Police Tuesday night was discouraging because there was a lot of work to do. Solli says he had a boat that was well equipped with a spare motor and two people that knew what they were doing. Solli says the police department didn't give them any directions of what they would like to be seen done. Solli says after an hour of waiting at the police station they abandoned that idea and worked their way back to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. That was at 11pm. Solli says Tuesday was a day concerned with getting people out of their homes. The major concern was that people were not convinced that there was a catastrophe. Many people were saying they would stick it out and stay at the house. Solli says people would have gone into shock if they tried to walk because the water was 46 degrees.

Solli says that at one point he had helped 40 people out of one house. The people were in water that was up over their ankles. He asked them if they wanted to go to UAF. One man, who Solli thought was the leader, said that they are going to stick it out. Solli left and went on to the next house. An hour and half later he went to the same house and he spotted a woman holding a two week old baby. The water was at that point above the knees. The people started piling into the boat. The leader then started demanding all the women and children go first. The leader got angry with Solli because Solli insisted that at least 3 or 4 of the men come along because if he gets in the [Noyes] slough and the boat gets hung up, he's got to have strong men to give him a hand. It was half and half [men and women] on the

boat. Solli says if the civil authorities had said that everyone was to get out of their homes, then there wouldn't have been the problems.

At 8:00 minutes into the recording some amusing things that were happening with people are discussed. Solli says it was amusing some of the stuff people wanted to take with them such as end tables and lamps. Most of the people were taking out heavy clothing and food. One interesting aspect was that of all of the people Solli took out via boat, which was about 450 from Tuesday, he had to tell a person to open up a bottle of beer because he was thirsty. He had to tell a lady that he wanted some cake because he was hungry. On Tuesday he had eggs at 4 am and didn't have another thing to eat until 6am Wednesday. On the other hand Solli says he went to one man's house trailer and the man was on top of the roof. The fella says this is for you and it was a half fifth of whiskey. Other than that one fellow offering the whiskey there wasn't a person who offered anything to Solli. Solli rants about people who opened up food and never offered anything to the people helping them. Solli asked a state trooper if there was anything he could do to help them and when they came back an hour later the trooper had a fifth of Canadian Club. Solli says almost all of the people were happy to follow someone. Solli says the best way to handle it is to tell people what to do. Solli says one woman became upset when he didn't let a litter of five dogs and puppies onto the boat. He told her that the boat was for people and that she should put the dogs on the roof with the food.

The interviewer asks how long it took Solli to get from Aurora to the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and back again. He said it took about 45 minutes for a round trip. Solli says the slough [Noyes] scared him a little bit because there was a log jam by the railroad bridge. Solli says one man did get his boat caught there and the man was towing a small aluminum boat when it happened. It could have been catastrophic but fortunately the two kids jumped off the boat onto the railroad bridge. Solli says he knew the area very well. Solli says he went downtown Wednesday night as well with the same confusion as to who was doing what in the police department. Wednesday night there were some problems. They lost the nut for the boat propeller. They got another propeller and started to take off for the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. A couple of people joined for the ride and the boat traveled 3 blocks from the police station and the 2nd propeller was lost. One of the guys said that they should paddle to the Arctic Gold building and take the motor off his boat. They got the guys motor and put it on Solli's boat and that's what they used for the remainder of the time. Solli says he put an ad in the newspaper trying to find the guy and on October 9th the guy showed up to pick up the engine. Solli says the police gave no direction but they did get gas at the Texaco station on Cushman St. This was on Tuesday night before they got to the police station. Solli's not sure if it was an Army person or a civilian working the gas station but they got 35 gallons of oil and took off. All the other gas was from various people who had some in their garages. Wednesday they took a few people out who were staying on the roof of their houses. They were spending a lot of time getting people back and forth who had urgent need to check on their houses. One man had a considerable collection of firearms that he was concerned about. Wednesday they spent a lot of time pulling fuse boxes. Solli says there was very little salt in the water and as a result there was no real danger of fires. Solli says they were worried about if the water went down and the power came on there might be enough water in there to start a fire. Solli says he started turning switches on when the water went down in his house and the oil burner went on

under 6 feet of water. The water was very clear. Wednesday it started to become apparent that there was a danger of looting in the Aurora area. One man reported about \$2,000 worth of custom made firearms stolen. When Solli says "we", he is including 4 or 5 boat operators in the Aurora area. Solli and his friends all knew each other. They all started to put things together and found that there were a couple teenagers whose parents had left them for the Lower 48 and the teenagers were just staying around and eating here and there. The two kids were seen in far too many houses to justify any need for being there. On Thursday Solli says he ended up coming up to the University of Alaska-Fairbanks to get a hold of Al George who is the Civil Defense Director at UAF who Solli knew personally. He told Al [No last name] he needed to get some soldiers in the Aurora area because of the looting. Al said he didn't have any contact with the state police and suggested that Solli contact Lou Hanes. A person from the Salvation Army overheard the conversation so he got on the radio to call the city police who relayed the message to the state police. After a number of complaints on Thursday and Friday, on Saturday three soldiers, three state police and a civilian showed up. They came by where Solli was staying up by the Flat Grove. Solli asked who they expected to catch with the nicely loaded boat. Solli said if they did spot somebody they could make about 3 knots against the current. In the process, they decided amongst themselves that the only thing to do was patrol themselves. All they did was stop people who were entering a house and ask who they were. It turned out that almost all with the exception of one case there was no one who could identify the individual. The two teenagers, who were staying at Busby's who owns a little café, were told by Solli and his crew to get inside and don't show their face until 8 o'clock the next morning. One of the boys asked Solli who he thinks he is. Solli believes one of the real failures of the disaster was that there wasn't one organization that took control, and every organization was fighting one another. Solli says that the city police wouldn't talk to state police and the City Defense couldn't talk to anyone. Solli said they went to the police department and asked them what they want and they said they didn't know. The man who loaned Solli the motor was part of the National Guard and he talked to the National Guard and it was taking hours to get planes unloaded. One of the commanding officers from Anchorage came up to find out what was taking so long and he started commanding civilians to help with work. Solli says it was a matter of people telling others what to do and people would do it. Solli says people will follow anyone who tells them to do something.

The interviewers ask if Solli saw much of the Army while he was working Aurora. Solli says he saw the Army in two major areas. Solli says he worked for Swarovski Aircrafts in their engineering department and he got a feel for how to fly helicopters. Solli says the pilots who were flying the helicopters were good. The other thing he saw was the Army was transporting a lot of people with their large vehicles. The Army was also bringing food and supplies. Solli's main criticism was that the drivers weren't concerned with the waves they were making. The Air Force personnel were told to slow down and they did. Tuesday night the area he first went to was the area of the Safeway. The area was sandbagged. There were armed men but none of them could tell Solli where everyone was set up. The other thing Solli saw was that whenever there was a group of civilians and military people together working on a job the civilians were working hard and the soldiers were sitting around. He said there were 12 soldiers just standing around watching. For the most part everyone had to scrounge up all the fuel and oil they could on their own. Solli is adamant about stating whoever he talked to that attempted to find out anything from the police didn't get an answer from them. Solli corrects himself and says that there was one

trooper named McQueen who was well organized. McQueen got a group together to determine how many people would be in a boat. The interviewer asks if College Road was above water. Solli says yes, and this was down by B&M Market. Creamer's Field was underwater and just on the other side of the railroad trestle was underwater.

40:30 Solli begins discussing where he was staying. He says Tuesday night he found his wife Carol at the UAF campus staying with the Darnells. He left there early in the morning and Wednesday night he stayed at his house and he was on a wet soggy mattress. He decided not to stay on his neighbor's roof because it was four men and one Eskimo and Chuck [No last name] was fond of the Eskimo so the three of the remaining men decided to go to their houses. Chuck is part Native so Solli says he guess it's alright. On Thursday Solli decided to send Carol to Seattle and the children went to Connecticut. Friday night he went up to Dr. Hood's house. The interviewer asks Solli what he thought of the situation on Monday. Solli says it would have been possible to drive up to Sea Land, but even to that point there wasn't any thought that the river would raise another five feet. What the actual crest was on the Chena River, Solli does not know. The fact that Hamilton Acres was flooding Monday night and they were screaming for boat he tossed it up his mind whether he should go there and he decided not to because he thought there was going to be help needed in Aurora. Solli says on Sunday the water was down far enough where vehicles could be brought in. Solli says there was never any statement by any public official or by anyone over the radio saying that people should evacuate. As a result many people were hesitant about leaving their homes. The interviewer asks if anyone was apprehensive about the facilities they would be going to stay at. Solli says people weren't apprehensive because they knew the University of Alaska-Fairbanks was above water. Solli says the people were docile and stunned. Solli says the people would just sit there when he picked them up in the boat. The children were generally under control of their parents. In a few instances Solli jumped in and ordered the kids to do certain things like sit down and stop moving around and they obeyed immediately. Solli said he has a very authoritative voice. In summing it up Solli again goes back to the general lack of authority by any group who could have been in authority. Solli says there are a few isolated cases of people acting peculiarly. Solli says if the same thing would have happened in a community in the Lower 48 then it would have been a different story. He says Salvation Army and Red Cross did an excellent job. The recording ends as Solli compliments the Red Cross.