

Rising Waters ^[1]

In this excerpt from an oral history interview, Pentecostal pastor Bert Pickett describes the despair that people felt after Hurricane Floyd's devastation. Pickett lost nearly all his possessions. He talks about how high the waters rose, how he escaped the flood, and how it felt to see his home again.

Charles Thompson

Well, yeah. You had four or five vehicles lost.

Bert Pickett

In the family, because my wife's aunt came down to live with us. There were five cars lost in one family. I lost three of my own. My daughter lost one. And my wife's first cousin lost a car. So that's five in one family -- she was in because they lived in a doublewide. We should've all moved out there because nothing happened out there. When the water came and got high, she was sick and we had to take care of her and take her out. When I saw the water rise over my Pontiac, a little Grand Prix, the tire, I saw the water go from under the tire to over the top, I said, "It's time for me to go." It's about an inch on that porch -- come in on that porch. I said, "It's time for me to go."

Charles Thompson

And that was on Thursday?

Bert Pickett

On Friday.

Charles Thompson

Okay. Wednesday the hurricane came --

Bert Pickett

Wednesday night. Wednesday evening, Wednesday night.

Charles Thompson

And there were winds but nothing big.

Bert Pickett

I got a call from my cousin in Maple Hill says -- he knew where I lived. He said, "Man, I got water in my den a foot deep." I didn't have nothing, man. I'm doing all right. Right then...

Charles Thompson

That was on Friday.

Bert Pickett

That was on Thursday.

Charles Thompson

On the 16th, and then on the 17th....

Bert Pickett

That was when it all hit the fan.

Charles Thompson

You started -- okay. When you said, "I got to get out of here", how did you do it? Did you get in a boat?

Bert Pickett

In a boat, I got my family out on a boat. I left last. That man over there -- that lady Murray and Wilson -- we were going to

stay right around because we didn't want people coming in the neighborhood and... We didn't think the water would -- nobody thought the water would get that high. So we were going to fight it out like some of the other men. It got a little bit high said, "It's time to go." So we all got...

Charles Thompson

Did you already have a boat?

Bert Pickett

We had a boat. We went out on a boat with friends and neighbors that came and took us out. Matter of fact, a white gentleman took my wife and aunt and I think... Something like that -- I went on his boat.

Charles Thompson

Do you remember what his name was?

Bert Pickett

Huh uh.

Charles Thompson

He just came, somebody you didn't even know.

Bert Pickett

Well, we know each other. Well, we live down here. You see each other. But you don't know...

Charles Thompson

So he's from the community?

Bert Pickett

From the community. Yeah. And he was taking people. He didn't know where his wife -- they were out, but he didn't know where they were. He was one of the folk that I said -- evidently he had lost before. Not through a flood but he said -- it's hard to come back once or twice. He said, "This was my second time." He was ready to give up. You could tell how he felt. I told him, "Man, you've got to keep on. You can't give up. If you give up, you're defeated." Where you're defeated first -- I believe this here -- is right here. If you're defeated in your mind first, then you're already lost. If your mind isn't defeated then you can't be defeated. That's what happened to Muhammad Ali. He wasn't as strong a fighter as Foreman. Well, he put mind power over the guys, his opponent, and knocked them off the air. This flood of the century, probably five hundred years, I hope, I won't be around if it happens again. I don't want to live that long. And I feel like probably it'll be a long, long time. I'm fifty-one, so, I don't want to see another one of these. Just stand in your yard and drowned, man. Nobody could believe this. No one had any dream in the water -- you figured, high water, a foot deep. That's high water. But feet of water. The guys told me they had a depth finder on a boat that came through here, and some places were fifteen feet, and some places were nineteen feet. One of the guys said he could've stood in his boat and touched the light line. You see how high the light lines are.

Charles Thompson

Man.

Bert Pickett

Some places it was lower.

Charles Thompson

They're thirty feet.

Bert Pickett

Yeah. Some places it was lower. He said I could've stood in my boat, man, and grabbed the light line. It's unbelievable -- you could -- it's just unbelievable. You can look at the water lines on the trees and tell how high it was. It would take a nine-foot man. A nine-foot man in every yard could've been real safe. He wouldn't have to worry about drowning. Other than that, a man six feet or seven feet, he's through. If he'd have hit a hole then he's drowned. That's bad, man.

Charles Thompson

So where did you go? Where did the community go?

Bert Pickett

Well, some went to Camp Kirkwood. The Presbyterian Church has a campsite across 117 about five miles from here. Most of the community went there. I went -- some went to their family outside of this community. I went to my wife's aunt. We all moved in there -- a doublewide. I stayed there for about three weeks, I believe, something like that.

Charles Thompson

And how long did the people stay at this camp?

Bert Pickett

About a month, a little bit longer. Probably until we got our trailers back in.

Charles Thompson

So you were staying at your wife's aunt's house, and you came back into the community. How long did it take before you were able to come back here?

Bert Pickett

About a month.

Charles Thompson

Before you could even see your house?

Bert Pickett

No. I came back about eleven days after, I think, because I didn't come back on the boat. I didn't -- I saw enough because I knew what it was like. Some people took their boats and came back in that Sunday. I came down -- I didn't want to come back here. I came back in when the water was down but your yard was still wet. I came back in about twelve days. The water is in about ten; about twelve days, I came in.

Charles Thompson

The water was in your house for ten days?

Bert Pickett

Yeah. Eight to ten days, we know that much.

Charles Thompson

You were talking in the house, when you were in there, about the water being angry.

Bert Pickett

Yes. This water had a force behind it. The first brick house as you come here, before that dumpster. You go look at the corner of the house, and you can see where the bricks are broken loose. I mean, the water had that much force. You could see where it broke the bricks loose from this house. And some of mine are cracked. The miple of the brick cracked on some of mine. His was much more damage than my house was. So the water had that angry force. Like it would turn your furniture around. It was just devastating. It would come inside your bedroom, your private. There's nobody in your bedroom but the water did. It went in there like a thief and turned over everything. Turned your bed sideways. It's just devastating. To look at that, that's when it breaks you up.

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