

The Problems of Flood Relief ^[1]

Raymond and Eunice English are an elderly Duplin County couple who weathered Hurricane Floyd. In this excerpt from 1999 interview, they are joined by their son, Wayne, and their nephew, Charles. Wayne and Charles do most of the talking in this interview, describing their experiences with the flooding and their frustrations with inadequate and disorganized relief. Like many flood victims, the Englishes were trying to rebuild their homes and lives with very little monetary help from the state and federal governments and were relying on volunteer and religious organizations for help.

Charles Thompson

Not at all. We haven't talked so much about your experience about what happened with flood relief. Do you have any vivid memories about...

Wayne English

I think everyone's got strong opinions about flood relief starting with the federal government right on down through the state on how little relief there's been.

Charles Thompson

Okay.

Wayne English

And right on down to the county.

Charles Thompson

Okay.

Wayne English

I want to go ahead and get technical. This is... The best consensus of this county is that it's run by a bunch of crooks who could care less about the people in it. Mainly the people on this end of the county...the southern part of the county...is probably, what the stepping stone of the county. We didn't even have a Red Cross-connection with the Red Cross in this county. There was weeks went by before Red Cross ever got here because Duplin County was the only county in North Carolina that did not have a Red Cross chapter in it because our county commissioners just let it lapse. So Red Cross didn't come in. They had to specially sent in or ordered in by, I don't know, the state of somebody. So it started there and went on up through the state. As far as people trying to get travel trailers, the problems they had. They couldn't get the state to come along and didn't care. It was run by a bunch of incompetents who lied, you know, just continuously lied to you. You'd call Raleigh about your travel trailer trying to get home and they would say, "Well, we'll call you right back." And you'd never hear from them again. I mean you go right on up to FEMA from the lying, the drunks that come around as FEMA representatives taking people. They claimed they were drunks. They were liars. They were working on a contract basis. And the more homes they hit in a day the more money they make so they would lie to people and tell them we'd be there at one o'clock and they'd come by at eleven. So they could leave a note saying we came by, you weren't here. That way I can do ten houses a day instead of five and make more money, you know, and get out of here. And they lied about the property damage. My parents lost everything: their house, all their personal items, their whole house. And I think they wrote in they lost less than two hundred dollars worth.

Eunice English

We weren't eligible for any help due to the fact that our inspector said we did not lose two hundred dollars worth of damage.

Charles Thompson

But we saw this pile in your yard today. Can you describe that pile out there? What all's in it?

Eunice English

Five or six generations of family heirlooms.

Charles Thompson

Including...

Eunice English

From the whole houses of furniture to mementos just passed through, trunks of history as you can see.

Wayne English

Well the history, the war uniforms, the...

Eunice English

It's just...

Wayne English

The old pie safes that were passed down from generation, you know, the old antiques.

Eunice English

Tools. All his tools that he had had since he was a boy.

Wayne English

Antique tools.

Eunice English

And a little pile about this big left over that I'd thrown out to one side. And now they have rusted and I doubt if he can ever use any of them.

Raymond English

Well we have...

Eunice English

So they're all gone.

Raymond English

I had a three bedroom home furnished, the living room furnished, dining room, kitchen [unclear] . And five closets, utility room, porch and a double garage. And he said, how much lost?

Eunice English

It said less than two hundred and one dollars. You had to have two hundred and one dollars to be eligible for SBA or family grant. So up until this time we two sat here with a twelve hundred and twenty-seven dollar rental assistance, is what we've had from FEMA. But I had three...

Eunice English

Three FEMA people...

Charles Thompson

Three FEMA people tell you...

Eunice English

That they were usually in disaster areas two to three weeks, possibly four. They did their job and they were gone. When they hit North Carolina they said they had never been treated by a state like the North Carolina officials had treated them. Everything that they did had to be passed through the state government, or the state workers, whoever was in charge up there. Every trailer had to be okayed by them. Every donation, every check passed, had to be okayed through the state. And said they were tied up completely. One stood out there and said, "We are here to assist North Carolina." He says, "Do you see anybody riding in my seat from North Carolina?" He said, "I'm not even supposed to be doing this." Said, "I'm here...been sent here to assist the North Carolina people." He said, "Where are they?" He said, "We're running way behind because we're giving our orders and they're just not going through right." He said, "We have never dealt with a disaster where we were treated like this." And I had two others to tell me the same thing.

Wayne English

Well the FEMA people said they usually run the program. They were experienced. They knew how to come in. And they said, almost everything had a ten-day turn around. But for some reason North Carolina, the officials in North Carolina, wanted the final say so on everything. Why anyone would what to take on that responsibility being unprepared, being

uneducated, unexperienced on how to deal with it. I just don't understand why...what the... Unless there was some kind of pride or ego thing there that North Carolina wanted the final say so. But if they'd let FEMA handle it...it was a very big disaster. But the FEMA people felt, I think, that the state really slowed everything down. It took, myself, it took right at eight weeks to get an inspection. And actually took a Congressional order to get a travel trailer to get home, which the FEMA people told me, being disabled, that that is usually put on a priority. If they read the list when they're handling it, they see a disabled person, they try to get them a travel trailer and get them home as quick...you know, put it on priority. In my case, I got a letter from my doctor telling how serious it was that I do get home because of my condition. And the state seemed to think it was a joke. And finally had to get... My doctor volunteered to contact our congressman and got a congressional order so that I could get home. That's what it took because of the state.

Charles Thompson

Where were you up to that point?

Wayne English

Staying at a house in Wallace about eight or nine miles away that we could neither afford or felt comfortable in. Anyway, people were getting home. It was slow. But I just couldn't understand it. And the FEMA people were saying the whole time, "Look, you're problem's with the state." We had some very nice FEMA people here to help us at our center here, our local center. I had a couple that helped me out especially one guy. He helped me a whole lot.

Charles Thompson

How?

Wayne English

Working...

Eunice English

Trying.

Wayne English

Well trying to do more than he possibly had to on my case, trying to get me home. He knew the condition of my disability and knew the state of...that I was in was very detrimental to that disability. He had talked...read a letter my doctor had sent him. And of the travel trailer ending up taking, what, over two months, a little over two months.

Eunice English

You've only been in it a week.

Wayne English

And I told him being on disability, you know, you have a very small income when you have to go on it at such a young age, and that we couldn't afford to live there. And, you know, with all the extra expenses, so that the whole FEMA situation... The problem with FEMA was basically their inspections. The part with the state was, "We want to run the show. We don't know how. But we want to run it. We're going to have the final say so." And the people they hired, all this temporary help, had no experience on how to run it. And basically, they had a bunch of people that didn't care about the people they were dealing with, and basically, too many liars, actual liars. I don't know how many people from the state of North Carolina. "I will get that information and call you back." And you come and you wait by the phone all day. You know, you're so distressed from the flood. You've lost everything and you're stressed out. And here you are waiting all day long for a phone call that never comes. You call back. You're handed off to somebody else. The same thing, "I'll get that information. I'll see what I can do and I'll call you right back." So, you know, it run the whole gamut from federal... Not so bad as far as the FEMA workers. They were pretty good.

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