

DAVID BRIGHAM AND MAGGIE SIMMS.

TRANSCRIPT of OH 1772V

This interview was recorded on October 30, 2010, for use in creating the film PACKED. It later was donated to the Maria Rogers Oral History Program for archiving. The interviewer is Mary Ann Williamson. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Alexandro Sanders. The interview was transcribed by Diane Rabson.

NOTE: The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[A.]

00:00

(I'm just going to ask a couple of warm-up questions to get us all used to talking to each other and make sure everything is technically OK. Maggie, can you tell us the date today?)

[Simms] The date today is October 30.

(And you've already given your names, so we have that. Give us your address or your location.)

Our address here in Gold Hill is 390 Hill Street.

(How long have you lived here?)

[Brigham] We bought the house about fourteen years ago, fourteen or fifteen years ago, from her parents. This is the house that Maggie grew up in.

(How cool is that! Were you in the mountains before that or in Gold Hill before that?)

[Simms] Before that we were in Northglenn. We left a four-bedroom brick house with a two-car garage for an 800-square-foot cabin in the mountains with no closets. [Laughter]

(So you downsized.)

[Simms] Yes. However, this was the house I grew up in, so for me it was coming back, old home week.

[instructions given to Ms. Simms so that footage will be useful for using in the film PACKED] (I noticed that a couple times you've looked at Angie and now you have to pretend like she's not there. [further instructions about where to look and not look])

(First of all have you ever been through a fire or evacuation before?)

[Brigham] Yes, I don't remember what year it was, but—

[Simms] We've been through a fire. This is our second fire.

[Brigham] Oh, yes. This is not our first evacuation. During the Sugarloaf fire, which is right across the canyon there, we were housesitting a house for a local musician and the fire came within, oh, a quarter mile of that house. We had to sneak in the back way because they had already closed the canyon. And that was different because we had to go through a stranger's house looking for what might be of value and loading it up and dragging it out. Then we came up to Gold Hill and basically watched the bombers dropping slurry down in the area we had just left for a couple of hours. I think the next day we were able to go back and put their stuff back in their house. It was the second big fire we've been through.

[Simms] As I recall, they were a little disgruntled by the things we chose to save for them. We weren't sure; we tried to get the picture albums. He actually is a musician. He had won a couple of gold records, I think, so we were going through their closets and find those things for them.

(What do you take from a stranger's house?)

We found photo albums, original manuscripts of music. Like Maggie said, some gold records. Videos of their baby, you know the first few days. It was just crazy. That time we didn't have much time, so we were going through a stranger's house at high speed looking for whatever we could possibly come up with.

(Why was the owner disgruntled? What did he think you should have taken?)

[Brigham] I don't know; I can't answer that.

[Simms] I can't remember why the owner was disgruntled, but I do kind of remember thinking, "Wow, we were caretaking your house. There was a fire. We didn't have a lot of time to think." I do remember being on the phone with them at some point, and they did say, be sure and get the records and the photo albums. But again, we were in a stranger's house, and when you're caretaking someone else's house, it's sort of like you're in their house, but you try not to be too invasive.

And you asked had we ever been in a fire before. I do want to say that when I was twenty-eight, everything I owned was packed in the back of a truck. I was driving from San Francisco to Colorado back home, and my truck caught on fire. Everything I owned burned.

04:59

But the difference is I was twenty-eight, and I really didn't have anything. I mean I had

furniture, I had clothes, I had mementos from San Francisco, my adventures there. But it wasn't like we were as invested as we were a month-and-a-half ago when the Labor Day fire hit.

(Oh, my gosh, you lost everything. That's horrible.)

Yes, it was horrible, but you know it was nothing compared to what some of my friends recently lost.

(Let's talk about the recent fire, and we'll start at the beginning. I know some people didn't get the reverse 911 call. Were you one of those? Did you get a call?)

[Brigham] I don't think we got the first round of them.

[Simms] Of the 911 calls.

[Brigham] The 911 calls—yes, we didn't get the first round of them. But we heard from a bullhorn on Main Street; we got the initial evacuation fairly quickly. That was, I don't know, around 11:00, I guess.

(Did you heed the evacuation notice at 11:00?)

[Brigham] When we got the notice, the first thing we did was load up all the things we had discussed in the past. The paintings and photos and financial records and things like that. We did that right away, immediately, and once we were loaded up, it turned out we had quite a bit of time. So then we started doing mitigation work around here. My son and I were mowing the grass out in the meadow and some neighbors were cutting some trees behind the house. So we actually had hours and hours. Because at the time the fire didn't look like it was coming here. It was hooking around to the south and east mostly, but at the same time you don't want to wait till the last minute as it turns out.

(When did you actually leave?)

[Brigham] Well, what time did YOU leave?

[Simms] When we actually left was—I believe I left around 4:00. What I did when I first saw the fire in the early morning; it was way down in the canyon, so I started taking pictures. I took pictures like every fifteen minutes. So I have a series of pictures that has the fire marching up the canyon.

I began to get kind of nervous when I realized that the Gold Hill Inn was canceling all of their party and sending all the musicians home. It was that point that we really realized that we needed to at least start the evacuation process. By 4:00, the sky according to my pictures was brown. The whole area in Gold Hill was brown and ash was falling. It was really pretty smoky all around our house. You could see that there was a fire coming from

the west, and I became very nervous and started begging my sons and husband, "We need to go, we need to go."

The way I remember it, Dave turned to my son and said, "Let your mother out." Because my son was parked behind my car. My car was already packed to the gills, and I mean packed to the gills. There was nothing else I could think of to pull out of this house to put in my car. There was no room anyway.

So I believe I left Gold Hill about 4:00 or 4:10, and I don't think these guys left until 5:00 or 5:10.

[Brigham] Somewhere around there. It got a lot quieter once she left.

[Simms] Ha-ha-ha. [Laughter]

(Let's talk about that car, packed to the gills. What kind of things were in it?)

[Simms] Coincidentally what was packed in our car—before we even started the evacuation process—was all of the accoutrements that we needed to pull off a murder mystery at the Hotel Boulderado. That was a Monday and the next Friday we were scheduled to do a murder mystery at the hotel, and I had said to David the day before, "Let's go ahead and pack up all of the murder mystery—the box, the costumes, everything that we need so we don't have to do it after Labor Day when we're going to be tired and you know, blah-blah.

09:54

So already in my car was everything I needed for this murder mystery. That was a huge amazing gift because we were in fact able to do that show.

So then after that we went for my mother's paintings. My mother has done a series of paintings in the early seventies of pretty much Gold Hill and the surrounding mountains. And it's a real historic record in a way of what this town looked like in those early days. It's changed somewhat since then. So we got all the paintings, all of my photo albums are over there in that case, so we got all the photo albums. Then I started kind of thinking, what will I need for the next year? If my house burns down, what will I need for the next year? Or what will I be bummed that I didn't catch?

I packed all of Dave's cowboy shirts [David chuckles] because we have a significant amount of money invested in them. I also packed all of my cowboy boots. I have a significant cowboy boot collection. Meanwhile David was bright enough to pack a week's worth of clothes. When I got down after being evacuated, when I got down to Boulder, I had nothing to wear but cowboy boots and the clothes on my back. And Dave's cowboy shirts. Dave meanwhile had a week's worth of clothes. I guess probably one of the funniest things I packed was my vacuum cleaner.

[David chuckles]

I don't know—you can see my house; it's not like I'm a neat freak. It's just that we had just purchased this vacuum cleaner, and it just seemed like I didn't want to let it go. [Chuckles]

Do you want to talk about your motorcycles?

(Yeah. Let's ask Dave. Dave, what did you take?)

[Brigham] After we did the initial packing of everything that we talked about that was vital—financial records, the paintings and things like that—I have two old motorcycles that I've had, one of which I bought in 1977. I've always planned, if there was time, to take those—they're somewhat irreplaceable. So I told Maggie, once we loaded up her car with everything else, I said, "I'm going to load the bikes now."

And she said, "Okay."

The neighbor and I loaded them up. Well, the next day we were telling this story to some of the other evacuees, and Maggie said when I said that—that I was going to load up the motorcycles—she thought, well, it would take an hour-and-a-half to argue about it, or it will take five minutes for me to load them up. I'm going to load them up anyway, so just let me do it, as it turns out.

[Simms] One of the caveats was the weekend before we had filled the truck that would hold these motorcycles with old wood off the property. So in order to load the motorcycles—it wasn't like we were just going to load them into his truck—we had to unload all of this wood in order to get his motorcycles in there.

[Brigham] Which doesn't take long when you're excited.

[Simms] And it didn't take long. We were excited.

[Brigham] A little bit.

[Simms] Yes.

(Would you say there was a fair amount of adrenaline going on?)

[Brigham] There was more adrenaline on her part than on mine. I was very calm pretty much, I feel like, through the whole thing. Maggie was up and down a little bit. I had gone down as soon as we saw the smoke, I had gone down and seen where the fire was. At that time, it looked like it really wasn't coming this way. As it turned out we had six hours after the evacuation before it actually came over the ridge. There was one little tendril that kept sneaking around to the west and finally came over the ridge. But up till then the entire

fire had gone to the south and east. So we had hours and hours of time. My son and I stayed until it looked hopeless. You know, when it came over the ridge a quarter mile wide and a hundred feet high, it was time to go. So we got out pretty quick at that point.

14:55 But even at that point, I don't think he and I were panicked, because we had already discussed what we were going to do and what could possibly happen, so it played out pretty much the way we had talked about it.

(How about you, Maggie? Describe your feelings.)

[Simms] My feelings—well, for one thing I do think there was a great deal of adrenaline coursing through my body. And the reason I think that is—not so much at the time; I didn't feel like I was panicked—but the next morning I woke up and I was really sore from carrying, throwing, packing, and pulling things off the walls—I realized—especially in the unpacking process, now that we are back in our home trying to get everything back on the walls, back on the shelves, back in the closets, I realized, wow, we grabbed a lot of stuff. We grabbed a lot of stuff. Of course it's given me an excuse to say or to demand that the house has to be clean before we put all the books back on the shelves. We have to do all the walls before we put all the paintings back. So it's been a big spring cleaning thing. I kind of wish I had some of that adrenaline that I experienced during the fire evacuation to now put it to use on my house. But that's neither here nor there.

(That's another film.)

[Simms] That's another film. Exactly, precisely.

(Let me ask you: was there any mental process that you used to decide what you should take with you?)

[Simms] Was there any mental process that you used?

(How did you decide what you were going to take with you?)

[Brigham] As far as what we take in case of a fire, we had discussed that over the years. The basics, the very basic things like if you have ten minutes, what do you take? Once again, that's financial records and passports and things like that, the photo albums and the paintings. Then after that, as we had time, then you start to expand that list. The motorcycles were not in the first list. They were in the second list, the second tier.

[Simms] [dryly] That's what he says now. [Chuckle]

[Brigham] Well, at least I—we—took you! [Laughter]

[Simms] Oh, how sweet.

[Brigham] And the dog, of course.

[Simms] And the dog. Yes.

[Brigham] Animals are always important—

[Simms] Absolutely, absolutely.

[Brigham] —because they count on you for everything. She was in the first tier.

[Simms] We had fortunately taken sort of a picture of our computer and our hard drive and put it on a hard disk. So I was really thankful that all the disks for the murder mystery theater company, all of our written work—Dave has written seventeen plays, seventeen murder mysteries. All of those were on disks. Those were really simple to throw into a bag. We have a firebox that holds all of our papers and you'd think, just leave that because it's fireproof. But we took that because it's a nice little suitcase, and it's simple and it's handy and we know where it is.

[Brigham] We took the computers, of course, because that's easy. You just unplug them and throw them in the car.

[Simms] We took this little table because it's a replica of a table that my father built. And my father, in fact, built that table. He built a lot of the furniture here in the house. He used to be a furniture builder, so that was sort of a small, easy piece to take. But short of trying to decide should we take the couch, should we take pieces of furniture—that was not in the picture.

(Because how do you feel about the other furniture?)

[Brigham] They're just things.

[Simms] Yes. Can be replaced.

[Brigham] The stuff that doesn't have an emotional connection or a nostalgic connection. This doesn't matter; it can be replaced.

[Simms] Right.

[Brigham] A television is a television.

[Simms] But now another interesting thing is less than a week later was the fire up at your mom's. What did you take for her?

[Brigham] My mother—six days after the fire here, I was on my way to Loveland, and I

was passing by my mother's house and there was a large fire a mile from her house. So in her case there are a lot of furnishings in her house that go back to my great-grandparents. I had called my brother, and we loaded up a lot of, like my great-grandmother's rocking chair and my grandfather's smoking stand, and all these things like that. And, of course, lots of photos and memorabilia.

20:12 Many knickknacks from Sweden that her mother had brought over and things like that so it was a very different evacuation for my mom.

(Had you lost that stuff in your mom's house, what would that have meant to your family?)

[Brigham] If the things that were in my mom's house had been destroyed, the nostalgic things, it would have been very heartbreaking. I'm very sentimental about things like that. I'm very conscious of my family history. I don't know as much about her side as I do about my father's side, but I'm a big history buff so I really like to have tangible links to the past whenever possible. Probably too much; I keep too much stuff.

There were things that were over 100 years old in her house that had been on her side of the family for a very long time. So that would have been tragic, especially for my mother who is in her 70s now, but for everyone.

(And Maggie, the same question for you about what—)

[Simms] What it would have meant.

(What would it have meant if you lost—)

This house?

(—those important things? _____.]

[Simms] Exactly. The kind of interesting thing is that when we evacuated from Gold Hill and went to Boulder, we went to my parents' home, where coincidentally we had an RV parked out in front. So that's where we stayed during the nine days of evacuation.

When David did finally arrive, and I was sitting in the living room with my mom and dad, he came in and he said, "I think we lost the house. I think it's all gone." He didn't know, but—based on what he and my son saw when the fire roared over this mountain, everybody thought Gold Hill was gone.

I remember seeing my parents—my parents are both 89 years old and they're very with it, and although they didn't say anything, I remember seeing it sort of cross their face: we lost the Gold Hill house. In my family, I'm an only child, and we have always talked about "never lose the Matchless." We've always referred to this house as the "Matchless Mine." Baby Doe's Matchless Mine—never sell the Matchless. Sort of in that fraction

of a second that I saw the wave cross my parents' psyche, that's what went through my mind, "We lost the Matchless." We lost the thing that my family has always prided and put above almost everything else. We lost our little gem, our little piece of heaven, and everything in it. Well, not everything because we evacuated stuff.

What would we do if we had lost it? We would probably resemble a lot of our friends who lost their homes. I mean, at this point, they are truly in mourning, they are shells of their former selves, they are stunned and they are sort of confused and emotionally battered. And I'm just thankful that—you know, I'm emotional enough and had we lost this, I would be having a very difficult time right now. I know I would be.

(I'm sure everybody who lost their homes were just shell-shocked and stunned.)

[Simms] Right, right.

24:30 (So I have to ask a question. The fire comes roaring up here. What happened? How did it not get your property?)

[Brigham] There are basically four reasons our house is still standing. First of all, the work that my son and I and the neighbors did mowing the meadow—we went like 100 feet out into the meadow, cutting the grass, which is waist high. The trees that were cut right behind our neighbor's house, and then three other factors. The wind shifted a little bit, several fire trucks—the first we'd seen all day because they were everywhere else being overrun—came down the road and were wetting down houses. And then the first slurry bomber run of the day was right down behind our row of houses here. Just minutes before it would have burned. When I left, I figured we had three to four minutes left before the fire reached our house. And it burned the trees within twenty feet here.

The first slurry bomber of the day was supposed to drop somewhere else. The wind shifted, and he couldn't see his target because of the smoke. So he announced he was going to drop behind this row of houses here, which turns out to be our house. He went right down behind Hill Street and made a perfect drop. Everything here was covered with slurry, which for awhile was our favorite color, kind of a maroon, sticky; looked like grape jam on everything. EVERYTHING.

[Simms] Reddish.

[Brigham] So those factors really made a difference. Our woodpile caught on fire between our house and the neighbor's. The boys from Ward were over with one of our fire trucks, and they put that out and were what we call "hotspotting," going around and putting out fires everywhere.

That's the only reason. A little shift in the wind and a little bit of luck.

(Sounds like you did some good mitigation too.)

[Brigham] Well, last-minute stuff. But better to be doing something than to just stand there and watch. Especially if you have the time, which we did.

[Simms] We had every weed whacker, every lawn mower, anything that would cut grass. There were about six of them out there, and we'd never done that before.

(I just have this picture of them all out there.)

[Brigham] We have pictures, we have photos.

(So your son was here with you?)

[Brigham] Our son, at the time—he was planning to come up for the barbecue, but later, of course. He's away at school and he comes back every weekend to see his girlfriend. But when we saw the fire and realized there was going to be an evacuation, Maggie called him and told him we needed his help right away. Of course initially he tried to come up Sunshine, which was already closed, but we all know back ways in. So he came out a different way and came up to help us. He was a great deal of help. We loaded up his car, Maggie's car and my truck and that was basically it.

(Was there anything that your son grabbed that you hadn't _____?)

[Brigham] Our son grabbed a box of keepsakes that he had thrown together. He went through his room and grabbed certain things that meant a lot to him. I couldn't tell you what they were at this point. He and I built model rockets when he was a kid; I know he grabbed one of those. He _____ saw it sticking out of the box as he was leaving. I don't know, baseball glove, things like that.

(And he's got those all with him? None of them are here?)

[Brigham] Oh, they're here, they're back now.

(—you can get model rocket and baseball glove. Once you left, was there anything you realized you hadn't taken? Like you got in the car and went, "Ah—;I forgot—;this or that.")

[Brigham] As far as things we forgot, I don't think so. I think later when we came back there were a few things that you looked at and went, "Well, we probably should have taken that but—;" But at the time we certainly weren't down there going, "Oh, my gosh, we forgot this."

One of the small tragedies of this—I never wear my wedding ring because I do electrical work. I took it when I left and was wearing it everywhere, which I never do, and one day I went for a motorcycle ride, to come up, for one thing, to see what roads

were open. And I lost my ring. It fell off. Because I never wore it. I didn't take it off, because I wasn't thinking about it. When I got home from the ride, it was gone. So that's kind of a sideline. A small tragedy, but irreplaceable thing.

[Simms] I think we'd really got most things just mostly because we had five hours or six hours to evacuate.

[Brigham] And we had put some thought into it in the past.

[Simms] Yes, we had.

29:47 [Brigham] One of the funny things—I don't remember who it was—there was a couple who had a list on their refrigerator of everything that they would take and do in case of a fire. And when the evacuation came, the wife took the kids and threw them in the car and left. Didn't do any of it. And the husband showed up later because, once again, they had a lot of time, and walking through the house, realized that nothing had been taken. Which is wise on her—life is more important than anything. But it was kind of funny that then he had to go through with the list because she had just blown the whole thing off. [chuckles]

(That was one of the things that we were talking about and that I'm curious about—although it doesn't sound like it happened to you guys—but did you lose your mind at any point or did you do something like that? You know, you thought you were all prepared and you just walked away from it. Was there any—?)

[Brigham] In our case, we just had so much time. We did go back—after the initial fifteen-minute load, we did think of things. Various small things. But we have friends who had literally five minutes. It was coming up the driveway when they looked out the kitchen window. You gotta go now, with the clothes on your back. That happened to several people just south of here, what they call Rim Road. The fire was going directly towards Rim Road right away and jumping from treetop to treetop.

Many of our friends who lost everything down there had to drive towards the fire to get out. There's only one way out. Whereas Gold Hill, there's four exits. Which is one reason I was comfortable the whole time in staying because we always knew that Lick Skillet to the north—you could see from our house that the fire was nowhere near it and there's always a good opening there. I never felt like I was losing it. For a long time, I didn't think it was going to come here. I was carefully watching the little finger that eventually did come over. We were watching it, and like I said it took six hours to come over the ridge. Up until then it seemed like we may not have any problems.

(Did you guys have an actual list or was it just kind of in your head?)

[Simms] Our list was actually in our head. We never made a real list. I'm not sure if we would still. I mean again, we're sort of blessed by the fact that we live in an 800

square-foot home.

[Brigham] We don't have a lot of stuff. [Chuckles]

[Simms] Yeah. So I think we got it all, and we kind of knew what to get, and I don't think any of us were panicked, per se.

(Last question is do you think you've been changed at all by the whole experience?)

[Brigham] I don't think it's changed ME at all. I don't think the evacuation and fire has changed me at all. If the house had burned, yes, very much differently. But unless you look out the back, you know, everything's still the same. Our home is still here. I wasn't even shocked when we came back at our area, because actually we saw it burning. So I knew what that was going to look like.

The drive up Sunshine was very moving, to see all that. Because we had gone out the other way. I was amazed at the devastation down there; it was pretty impressive. It's funny that you don't actively feel traumatized, but it took a little while to get back in gear when we came back. Things were kind of—you know, it was just kind of strange. And it took a long time to get back into the normal swing of things.

(Would you agree with that, Maggie?)

[Simms] Do I think that this experience has changed me? Ah, I do think it has changed me in very subtle ways. I think as time goes on, I guess it's colored my thinking. It's sort of put some shades on how I do things and how I function in my world. As I said, the fire yesterday just really brought out more emotion than I was at all prepared for. It just sort of came out of the blue.

35:04 I do think that I was traumatized by the experience, but I think one of the biggest traumas that I have felt and do still feel is the loss of my friends. They talk about survivor's guilt, and I certainly think I have that in spades. I find myself pretty much every day trying to think of ways that I can help those people who—some of them didn't lose everything, but their jobs were impacted, their ability to exist in what is already a fairly financially challenging world has been affected. I go to a lot of secondhand stores to find costumes for our theatre company. Whenever I go there, I see a piece of furniture and think, "Oh, well, I'm going to go ahead and buy that for Katie or for my friend Kathy. I find myself combing through my things trying to find pictures of my friends' children that they lost, that I know if I could just make a copy of it, I can give it back to them. I find myself valuing things like pictures and friendships and the stuff that you can't put a monetary value on, greatly.

Of course, I think I valued them before but not nearly as much as after the fire. "BF" and "AF."

(Well, thank you.)

37:03 [End of interview]