

Report of Charles E. Childs — Body Dispatch, Body Identification, Missing and Found Persons

Early on Saturday morning, June 10th, I reported to the Disaster Headquarters and became part of a team of Military (Regular and National Guard) personnel for the purpose of rescue and body search. We requested two police officers, one jeep, and one weapons carrier. This, along with my personal wagoner, then became the nucleus of the main body pick-up crew. We went into the houses, basements, and garages, after we were certain that all electricity was shut off, and we searched under bridges, in piles of debris, cars, ditches, and up in trees. The bodies that we found were mangled and most of them beyond recognition. We placed the bodies in the back of the weapons carrier and wagoner and took them to Behrens' Mortuary. The garage of the mortuary was lined with bodies and soon the bodies had to be taken to two other mortuaries. When they all became full, we used a State Highway building. It was difficult to keep track of where the bodies were picked up because so many different people were picking them up, and to help with identification, it was necessary to know the location of pick-up. The decision was then made that only one unit should be picking up the bodies, so an announcement was made for the radio that any person spotting a body should call the body pick-up dispatch number. We then dispatched the pick-up crew (which we split into two units) to that area. We used heavy equipment to help get the bodies out and used radio dispatch so both crews would not converge on the same area. After getting this set up, we turned the body pick-up unit over to the Sheriff's Office where they had good radio for expedience. After the first hectic days were over and the bodies were becoming harder to find, dogs were brought in to help sniff out the bodies and the crews were given gas masks and special metal boxes to place the decomposed bodies in.

At the mortuaries, Mr. George Behrens had morticians from other areas helping. DCI and FBI personnel worked on the identification. The missing person section worked closely with the identification department by submitting information useful for identification on the missing person who was probably dead. As of Sunday morning, the 11th of June, 155 bodies had been embalmed and ready for viewing. Refrigerated trucks were used for storage until the bodies were identified. The mortuaries used doctors, nurses, ministers, psyslogiests, etc., to be with the next of kin when trying to identify their loved ones. This system is good when you realize the effects of walking into a mortuary with so many bodies lined up side by side for identification purposes.

Early on Saturday morning, calls were coming in so fast about missing persons that the disaster headquarters started putting anyone on a phone that wanted to help. Names were being taken without addresses, identification, or even who was calling. A list of over 4,000 missing people was compiled on a computerized list. This list was mounted on a wall and people came streaming in to check for

names. Names were then added or deleted. This area was located across from the Sheriff's Office and all the phones were tied up; this became mass confusion. Monday morning I was asked to take this section over and to try to get the missing list down to a reasonable list.

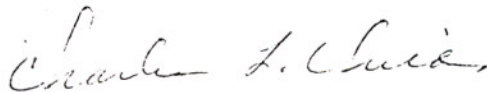
I moved the missing person section on Main Floor of the Court House where it would be easier for the people to come without cluttering up the hallway in the Sheriff's Department or tying up the phones. We ordered four phones on one number and had one phone for displaced persons. We set up four shifts of six hours each with seven people monitoring this section 24 hours a day.

The phones were ringing constantly and calls were coming in from all over the world--one call came from New Zealand and the caller was inquiring about his daughter who lived in Rapid City. The girl that answered the phone was his daughter. I took a call from Australia concerning a boy that was some where in the United States and they wanted me to try to locate him. We put the missing list on the air for three nights after notifying the public by radio and TV that the list would be read. We used seven phones for the incoming calls while the list was being read. The phones rang constantly and the first night we took over 2,000 names off the list. By the third night we had reduced the list down to 600 names. We then used the phones to call the people who had called in a missing name, we wrote letters, used the Hot Lines for long distant calls, used the newspaper (both local and national), we checked all the license numbers of the wrecked cars from the flood and contacted the owners of these cars--several were out of state cars and we were told by the owners that they had left their cars and found other transportation to return to their homes. Another system we used was checking registers of the Lead Gold Mine and Mount Rushmore to see what tourists were in this area at that time. By making calls to the homes of those registered, we were able to determine if they could possibly be missing. As the list was reduced, the staff was reduced until there was only my daughter and myself working on the list in my own office. Several calls have been received up to this date in November, 1972, and I have been able to help them locate the person they were concerned about. I am convinced that we have only five missing people, who are probably dead, and so the final number is 237 dead and five missing.

I would like to add here that I was extremely proud of my own family in the time of this disaster, as I had my wife, two daughters and one daughter-in-law working on the missing persons and body pick-up phones, one son and one son-in-law working on body pick-up and one son-in-law working on clean-up. My other daughter had to stay home to take care of my granddaughter. They all put in long hours, as did many other people in the community.

If I were to be placed in this position again, I would not change the policy that we used. I would have the identification cards ready for use so when a call came in about a missing person, all possible information would be entered on the card. I would reduce the staff down to the same six hour shifts of four shifts for 24 hours a day, and I would use only personnel who could cope with

the emotional strain. This would then provide a stable and well organized missing persons section. It would also make certain that there was only one missing persons section--the Red Cross started getting into this section and this makes only for confusion. I found that cooperation was necessary with all concerned and when this is done, the section can run very smoothly.



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