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THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
HOBOKEN STORIES:
REMEMBERING STORM SANDY

INTERVIEWEE: BILLY GEIB
INTERVIEWER: BOB FOSTER
LOCATION: 3 WILLOW TERRACE, HOBOKEN, NJ
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Track #1

BF: I'm sitting here in Billy Geib's house, at 3 Willow Terrace, on September 2nd. It's Labor Day, and it's about a quarter of 4:00. Billy, could you kind of introduce yourself? Just give a little background. If you could just tell us a little bit about your background -- how long you've lived in Hoboken, and your current employment.

BG: Okay. My name is William Geib. I've lived in Hoboken fifty-one years. I'm an electrician for New Jersey Transit, and I've been there, currently, four years.

BF: And were you on duty the night of the storm?

BG: Yes.

BF: And -- just backtracking a little bit -- the storm really started to kick in -- what? That Monday night?

BG: It was Monday night, around 9:00 at night.

BF: And what do you remember from that night?

BG: I remember the scene like -- I was in the engine house. I remember seeing water coming down the tracks, almost like a small tsunami.

BF: What do you mean by that?

BG: Just water coming towards us.

BF: And that was from the river?

BG: From the river.

BF: Had you ever seen that before?

BG: Never -- and I've been here a long time.
Fifty-one years.

BF: And can you talk about (for people who don't know) where the yard is?

BG: I was situated at Observer -- a little south of Observer Highway, near Bloomfield Street. Our yard begins between Hudson and Washington Street. I saw the water coming more or less when it was at Washington Street. We said to each other, "We'd better get to higher ground."

BF: And did you have any warning, like when you came on duty that day, that people expected something like this to happen?

BG: We were warned that there would be a storm and a lot of rain, but we never thought the Hudson River would submerge like that; come up like that.

BF: Right. But even the night before, wasn't there a lot of water down by the station? Did you notice any water? You know, it was kind of high-tide, and so on.

BG: Yes, there was high-tide, and when we get high-tide, the tracks go underwater in the depot. That's like River Street. Yes, we did. I did hear on the radio, on the transit radio, that the trains couldn't pull in all the way because of the high-tide. Whenever we have high-tide, like a two-inch downpour, that always happens.

BF: So the train can't pull all the way into the platform. What happens? Do you stop like a hundred feet?

BG: They stop like a hundred feet from the block. The block is the actual depot.

BF: So people can still get off on the platform --

BG: Yes, a hundred feet away.

BF: -- but if it's quite a few cars, they might have to enter through the cars at the end, to exit off.

BG: Right. It is a little dangerous. They don't want the electrical cables on the train to go under water. That's why they have to stop further out, before they can come in.

BF: So there are electrical cables on the train, on the underside.

BG: Yes. On the carriage.

BF: How much clearance is there?

BG: I would say about three to four feet.

BF: And how big is your crew?

BG: My crew -- I'm in the engine house. There are like twelve of us. But on that night, I would say there were six of us, because we had three different shifts.

BF: And which shift do you work?

BG: I work 4:00 P.M. to Midnight.

BF: So his happened around 9:00, that you started to see the water surge into the yard.

BG: Yes.

BF: So where did you go for higher ground?

BG: I went to the service shack tower. We have a tower there. My foreman looks out at all the tracks. They can keep an eye on us. The we have another tower that's on Washington Street, that's called the Yardmaster's Tower. They knew to get out of there around that time.

BF: So you go up in the tower. You've got a stairwell, or an elevator, or -- ?

BG: We have an elevator. We have two stairways. We have a fire-escape kind of stairway that we

most often use. Then we have an indoor staircase that we use.

BF: So it's 9:00 -- and how many more hours do you have on shift?

BG: I had three hours to go but they asked me to stay. I stayed the night. But we went from the engine house to the service shack, and doing that we ran across the tracks. That's when the water was still coming, and it swept my friend off his feet, and took him about twenty feet. He was like floating. He hit his "head" on one of the steel beams.

BF: Say that again?

BG: The water took him about twenty feet -- swept him off his feet -- and he's a big guy, like 220, 6'2", a pretty sold guy. It took him off his feet, swept him about twenty feet -- and he was behind me. I just made it across. His "ribs" hit a steel beam, and he lost his cellphone, soaking wet.

BF: Obviously, nothing like this had ever happened before. He had been on the job for a number of years?

BG: He had been there twenty-five years; never saw anything like it.

BF: So what happens next?

BG: So we go out to the tower, and during that time there were engines running, and trains plugged in, with lights on the cars. My co-workers went to each train to try to shut them off, so they could save the engines. They were in water up to, I'd say, their chests -- and they're my size: 5'7"-5'8", and the water was up to their chests. These are plugged in -- they're plugged in. They're 480 volts. It comes off the generator on the engine, to provide lighting and air-conditioning to the cars. I was yelling from the fire escape, "Get out of the water. Some are \$11 million for a new one. At that point he tried to climb from car to car -- because the engines were close to each other. He was using his key to stay out of the water. I was afraid he'd get electrocuted, because of the power. It was a "you don't want to drop a battery-

operated thing in your bathtub" kind of thing. My co-workers were able to shut off some of the engines out of the yard. And pull knife switch.

BF: What would they have to do to shut off an engine?

BG: You pull the emergency stop in the engine itself.

BF: So that wouldn't be underwater; that would be in the engine car.

BG: Right. But to get to these engines -- they were in water, and the cables were underwater.

BF: And where are the batteries?

BG: The batteries are a little higher. They have helped them. The batteries are in the engine, a little bit higher -- I would say about five feet higher -- because when we opened it we had to pull the door down, to access the batteries. We put water in the batteries every ninety-two days. We service the batteries.

BF: And I get a sense that these batteries are big.

BG: We have about thirty-two batteries, and they're bigger than the car batteries. They're like truck batteries. I would say sixteen inches.

BF: So no one got hurt -- except for my friend, who got washed away -- carried with the floodwater. Did they talk about it afterwards, what they did?

BG: Yes, we were talking about it. Who lost their cellphone; who was into the water up to their chest; "You're crazy for doing that, risking you life for an engine." But some of these engines we get attached to, because, you know, they all break down. We love the ones that don't break down, obviously. It was quite a night, I'll tell you.

BF: Do you have names for the engines?

BG: Not really, no.

BF: So you figure they were able to shut down -- you said, what? Three or nine?

BG: I would say maybe six out of ten.

BF: And so why did they stop? Were they just physically exhausted, or -- ?

BG: At that point it became a danger. The water just kept coming, and it was moving dumpsters; it was picking up containers; we have trailers that we store stuff in, that that was being picked up; we had garbage cans coming in from the depot; a lot of debris. We were wondering what was in that water at this point, and better get out.

BF: It wouldn't move an engine, though. That would be too heavy.

BG: Yes.

BF: And what would be the cross street of Hoboken, from Observer Highway? Would it be Willow Ave?

BG: Well, the yard -- yes. The yard is Bloomfield, Park, Bloomfield Garden, Willow -- I'd say around Park and Garden is where they were shutting the engines down.

BF: Gotcha. So then you all went to the tower?

BG: We went up to the tower, and I'd say maybe -- I think John and I went out -- the water did submerge, or recede. I can't remember exactly when. I remember looking out of the tower -- I looked outside four corners -- Observer Highway -- I saw the stop sign. The water was, I'd say, two-thirds up on the south side. That was crazy. I never saw that. And [unclear] was underwater.

BF: So it would be around Newman Leather, where you saw that.

BG: Yes.

BF: Okay. So that's Willow. Right?

BG: Yes. Willow.

BF: So there are six engine house electricians on duty, and you're all up in the tower?

BG: Right. But we also had cleaners, laborers, car inspectors. So upstairs we had, I'd say, about twenty-five guys.

BF: So it's a big space.

BG: Yes. It's like a big cafeteria. It's fairly new, too. I think it was built ten years ago.

BF: And how high up is the tower?

BG: I would say about forty feet.

BF: Okay. And you can look over Hoboken, in general.

BG: Yes. The million-dollar view of Manhattan, looking north. We only have these little windows, where we punch out. But looking west, that's the foreman's office, the training office. Those offices we

don't have access to. But that night we did. We have windows on west side.

We kept seeing big, red -- like you could tell transformers were blowing on the west side. I guess that's where our main grid is.

BF: In the west side of Hoboken, not in the train yard. You're talking around --

BG: Yes. You just kept seeing big, red flares.

BF: Yes. Around Second Street, I think.

BG: You remember that?

BF: Yes. I mean, I heard about it, and I know where those units are.

BG: We heard a little [vocalizes] -- I don't know if they were explosions or --

BF: And I guess the lights went out at that point.

BG: We did have a couple of -- we had emergency night lights.

BF: Just those little ones, on the wall.

BG: Right -- which burned out. But we had the generator for the -- that's why we went to the service shack tower. We have a generator -- it's pretty big -- I'd say it's the size of this, from here to the end of that wall, that tall.

BF: So like 4' by 5'.

BG: That powered -- I think that powers a hot-water tank for showers and some lighting, some office lighting.

BF: So did that just kick in? Or you knew how to turn it on?

BG: That automatically kicks in, because with the yard we shut the power off a lot, because they do

work on the [unclear], and sometimes it's affects our electricity, as well.

BF: So, obviously, no trains are coming into the yard at this point. Like after 9:00, is there much activity of trains coming down -- ?

BG: The last train was like 7:30.

BF: Because they knew the storm was coming, and they probably stopped.

BG: Yes. What happened was, when we went to higher ground -- it was funny, because the one yard goes like this. Then we have the B yard, which goes kind of up, upgrade, and this is like a downgrade. The Days yard is lower than the B yard. So in the B yard, see, that's what they did. They put a lot of trains on the B yard, to make sure that they were covered. We set up some trains to keep warm in, and to set up an office or whatever. We had little outlets where you could plug in your laptop; so we kind of made that home base. We did that with four trains.

BF: This is the next day?

BG: The next day, and that night. And in the morning.

BF: That night. So you worked right through. You came on what time?

BG: I came on at 4:00.

BF: Four o'clock. So you're working until --

BG: I worked until 1:00 the next day, in the morning.

BF: So what is there to do, in the morning?

BG: There's nothing to do, but I don't know. I guess they wanted us on hand. Some people tried to make it home to their -- because they had houses that were under -- I was concerned about my house and Janice. Janice was calling me -- "Are you okay." Yes. The house was like on an island. Did you get water?

BF: I was okay. It was close, but we did okay.

So when do you realize what type of damage is done to the trains, themselves?

BG: That took a couple weeks. We had to tow everything. But we were out of commission for a couple of weeks. But they still had us come in. At that point, we were picking up garbage -- because there was garbage everywhere. Whatever was in that river was now on our tracks. So we grabbed a garbage bag and gloves, and we filled up -- I don't know -- 500 garbage bags, with the crew. We made like a line --

Track #2

BF: So Billy, I just wanted to go back -- and tell us a little bit more -- you said that you went back to work but there wasn't that much to do. So what did you do?

BG: What we did was to get "foremen" set up gloves and garbage bags, and we went out to the yard, with gloves and garbage bags, and picked up a lot of debris. A lot. There were things -- there was everything but the

kitchen sink out there -- and I think we even came across a kitchen sink.

BF: So it's a while before the damage is known. Do you remember how many train engines you lost?

BG: I think we lost, in Hoboken, a lot.

BF: Wow. And do you remember what that represented, financially? It's got to be a lot.

BG: Yes.

BF: That's okay. But millions. I think you're right. And did anyone talk about "insurance will help pay for that?" You're in the trenches, so you wouldn't maybe know about that type of stuff.

BG: Yes. The foremen might know.

BF: Then when would you say the yard was ready to go, and you had train service. Do you remember how long that took?

BG: I think we came back about two and a weeks -- we came back maybe running one line. We came back at maybe twenty-five percent. Then in a month we came back at sixty-percent. Then a month and a half -- well, our electrical grid system -- that took -- I remember they said April. That took about six months to get, because when the grids blew up, they had to wait for parts. They actually had to rebuild it. They were trying to wait for the same part, but they figured it better to just go with a new system.

BF: And when you say "the grid" -- what's that?

BG: The power system for transit -- the "catenary," [phonetic] which is 25,000 volts. That's the wire on top, that takes care of the electric trains.

BF: So all the trains are electric. There's a wire on top that connects it, and hooks it in with the battery and --

BG: That's probably twenty-percent of Hoboken, the electric trains. But we have diesel. We have

diesel engines, that are called the "push and pulls." So we were just strictly on that after the storm.

BF: Do those trains also have batteries, the diesels?

BG: Yes. They store -- they have the batteries for capacitors.

BF: So they run the system from the train -- like the electrical on the train, and the air-conditioning?

BG: Yes, but it's run by diesel. The batteries store the power that the diesel generates. At that point, the water was gone, so we could run the diesels. But we couldn't run the electric, because they couldn't turn the power back on.

BF: I remember there was some talk about that the trains were really supposed to be relocated to higher ground, like a storm plan and things like that, that probably went back to Irene, the year before.

BG: We did. The [unclear] manager and some of the other -- I guess we had these type of engineers on the job -- from the Irene experience, they did bring engines to higher ground.

BF: Because, I guess, ideally, you would have taken all those engines, except for maybe one, like an emergency way out -- you would have taken them to higher ground. What would be considered higher ground?

BG: Well, all the electrical trains they brought to the tunnel. You know when the trains leave Hoboken --

BF: This would be back by Hoboken Avenue and the motorcycle club?

BG: Yes. Yes. That tunnel. We actually filled that tunnel up with the electrical cars. We brought them there. And none of the electric trains were damaged.

BF: But there were some in the yard that got damaged.

BG: Yes.

BF: How many trains would fit in that tunnel?

BG: I would say --

BF: Engines, I mean. How many engines?

BG: Well, electrical -- their cars, electric -- we do have an electric engine, as well. I would say three trains, unless the tunnel is a two-way -- six -- we'd have six -- eighteen, maybe?

BF: Where does that tunnel go?

BG: It goes toward Secaucus.

BF: Is it a long tunnel?

BG: I'd say it's about a $\frac{1}{2}$ mile.

BF: Really? That's a really old tunnel, too.

BG: Yes. Let me see. I go in there -- have you taken the train?

BF: I haven't, because that means like trains from the Secaucus transfer station come through there, and go into Hoboken.

BG: Yes. I would say three-quarters of a mile. I never take the train.

BF: Okay. I think that's pretty good. So do you think, if there's another storm like that, your crew is better prepared?

BG: I think we are, yes. But that was like a tsunami. I don't think we'll ever see that again. Hopefully not.

BF: That's the big question, right?

BG: Yes. There was five feet of water on Park Avenue. I felt sorry for everyone on First Street. And, again, our neighbors on Sixth Street -- Seventh Street. Oh. At the end, when I came home the next day, I walked home. I took Bloomfield Street and walked all the way to Sixth Street, and made the rest. On Garden Street, it was up to my ankles. On Park, it was up to my knees. So

I said, "Let me go --" because Sixth Street was high, Sixth between Park and Willow. I said, "Let me go to Seventh Street, it might be lower." Big mistake; at that point it was up to my waist. I came home, and I passed your house. I was so afraid of stepping on a manhole cover and going down -- so I was kind of like testing the street -- the sidewalk before my next step on the street.

BF: Your fear was that the manhole cover would have been popped up, because the water was coming up from the sewer.

BG: Yes -- because that happened to someone in Brooklyn or something.

BF: Did it happen to anyone in Hoboken? I don't think I heard of that. But it could have, like you said. Apparently, there were enough other places where it could come up.

BG: I've seen them pop up in Weehawken, just from a torrential downpour. The water comes down from the mountain, or the hill, and you know that long, steep hill in Weehawken, by the Bank of America ATM machines?

BF: The Shades.

BG: The Shades. Those manhole covers pop. They come right off. I've seen it.

BG: In Hoboken, of course, the water is coming up -- if you had a basement apartment, it's coming up the sinks, it's coming up the toilets.

BG: My friend lives on Ninth and Park, and he was worried about his front window. It was coming up behind him. It sounded funny, but it really wasn't. Because his electrical panel was submerged. They were all worried about me. I left at midnight the next day. They actually drove me to Third Street. They were looking for us -- some food. That was the other thing. We couldn't find food.

BF: This is while you're on-duty at NJ Transit. But Public Service set up an emergency center; FEMA; trucks were coming in with water. I actually have a dinner from that night. I think I'm keeping it for memories. It's what the Army military uses to feed their

men, I guess during war. Right? It's really crazy, how you do this, too.

BF: Did you eat one? Did you have one?

BG: I tried one, yes, at the job. Not here. It was crazy. The water was going, and people didn't know what to do. You couldn't go to the bank. You can't access money. We had no time clocks. I guess there were some stores open with flashlights, selling food. The A&P, they had flashlights to look at the register. Remember that? And I love how Hoboken came together. People who did have power on Hudson Street were helping people out -- "Charge your cellphone here." And gas. No one could get gas for their car. It was pretty crazy.

BF: And your car was okay?

BG: My car was okay. Oh. What happened by my job was a tall building -- they have a parking garage, and the cars were floating under the building, in the garage, and they were hitting the columns that hold up the building. Those people couldn't get back for months, like six months. They had to make sure it was safe.

BF: What building is that?

BG: It's on Henderson Street, right next door to the coffee --

BF: Oh, the Kolbrick's --

BG: Kolbrick's.

BF: That building called the Zephyr?

BG: The Zephyr. Yes. They were shut down. They couldn't exit there.

BF: That's fairly close to one of the train overpasses.

BG: It's right next to the overpass. Yes.

BF: It's actually Jersey City. Right?

BG: Probably right on top of the border, yes.

BF: I didn't realize that.

BG: But then we were all up there in the service shack, and that became our new home base. But we had trains to stay warm -- because we didn't have heat at that point, on the service shack. We had body heat. There was a lot of people. Transit did us a favor. To keep us going, they said "Clean up." And that's what we did. I thank my foreman every day for letting me work.

BF: Do most of the guys live right in this area? Because I guess you had the advantage. You lived in Hoboken.

BG: Well, there are a lot of guys in Jersey City. I'd say, probably, in a ten-mile radius, there's a lot of us. But some of us are south. There's one guy who comes from Red Bank, which is forty minutes. Another guy's from Woodbridge. Edison.

BF: Probably some of them couldn't even get here.

BG: Right. Some of them couldn't get here. Hoboken wouldn't let them in. It was a rough time. And when we got paid -- because the time clocks didn't work, and the timekeeper couldn't -- we had to go everything on paper.

BF: And on the home front, in Willow Terrace, it seems like this terrace did a little better than the North Terrace. Is that true?

BG: Absolutely. Yes. I noticed that the water came one inch -- one inch from coming into our living room. I believe Mother Nature was good to us, because I feed the birds.

BF: Number one through thirty-two, right?

BG: Yes.

BF: And did anyone get it bad in this terrace?

BG: The people across the street lost their boiler, hot-water heater. Our whole crawlspace was under.

BF: Do you have a sense of how quickly it disappeared from the crawlspace?

BG: Yes. We have a guy who does swimming pools. He builds swimming pools. He had these pumps that were awesome. When you do one house you do them all, because they're all connected. He pumped it out, but it really couldn't go anywhere. These drains worked, and I'm wondering if the pump worked. The only thing is, it would be pumping it back to the river, which was coming back. So it's almost like a water fountain, that recycles its own.

But it did disappear -- what? -- a day or two days, it was gone? Yes.

BF: We still had power out.

BG: Oh, we didn't have power, I would say, for fifteen days. Fourteen days. You?

BF: I thought it was more like nine days, but I could be wrong.

BG: No, it was fourteen. Then we got power back, and we didn't have cable. [Laughs] We love TV. But,

I'll tell you, that's when you know -- we are so fortunate. We take so many things for granted -- electricity -- they could have turned our power back, but it was those buildings across the street -- because when I came back from work, about a week later, they started turning the power back on, and we were getting brownouts here and there. The firemen said, "This panel is burned, and we've got to shut it off." So they turned the main grid off. I said to the fireman, "Just shut that panel off. Shut that main off, and you can turn the others on." And he said, "Are you a licensed electrician?" I said, "No." He goes, "Then you can't do it." The neighbors wanted to kill that fireman, because we'd had it.

BF: I guess the fear was -- you could turn it back on, but people would probably just flip the switch in their building anyway, even though they weren't supposed to, and cause a problem. Because anyone could flip the switch.

BG: Unless you lock it.

BF: Did you hear any other stories of people's situations, that stick in your mind?

BG: Well, my friend who lives at 1st and Park, yes. He lives right next door to a deli on 1st and Park, and he said he was up to his chest in water, where he shut his power off, and he saw arcing -- which I thought was crazy. Why would you even go in there? It's his house. It's a house. But he said he didn't get electrocuted. I find that strange, but maybe he just didn't know what he was doing, and maybe it was already out.

BF: So how did that work? What if you were wearing sneakers or insulated boots? Would that prevent you from getting shocked, if you were dealing with -- ?

BG: If it's in the water, you're going to get electrocuted.

BF: I don't think we heard of anyone getting hit in Hoboken.

BG: No. No one got electrocuted.

BF: Which is pretty amazing, actually. So no one in the trains, and no one [unclear].

BG: Well, with us being underwater, climbing on an engine -- and you saw the lights go dim, underwater. The water came and covered the lights, and my friend was right there. I was like, "God!" I was praying he wouldn't get electrocuted. Engine on First and Park, but a lot of my friends on Bloomfield Street were okay. My friend lived on First and Harrison. She said that the people behind her there -- First and Jackson -- the National Guard were here, pulling people out on boats. I didn't see that, but I heard.

BF: Some of the buildings would have an elevator, the power's out --

BG: -- and it's seventeen stories. And I guess she had two kids --

BF: Or you're in a wheelchair. Something like that. They were taking people through windows.

BG: I remember seeing a convoy, I guess you would say, of ambulances from all different towns, coming

down Willow, to transport the people, I guess up to Christ Hospital.

BF: The night before, they closed down the hospital. That meant that everyone needed to be relocated. As I understand it, the mayor insisted that happen. So I walked by the hospital the night before, and you had like three blocks of ambulances, right down Willow, and Clinton. They were just coming in, and, like you said, every town in New Jersey, it seemed like, was represented. Every one is flashing lights. I had never seen that.

BG: They brought a big generator I remember seeing, like wide-load. I think it was a generator for the hospital, just to keep stuff cold.

BF: Medicines and things like that. Blood.

BG: Not for the building, but for certain [unclear] that are probably designated for generators.

BF: Sure. Sure. Okay. I think we got it. I think you gave a really unique perspective, that -- not too many people were on-site, in the yard, when that happened.

BG: It was like a tsunami. And it was weird.
You saw the Japan tsunami. That was before, right?

BF: Yes.

BG: I remember watching that on TV. You just saw things picked up and moved, and that's what I saw in the yard. It was like the Delaware Water Gap, but twenty times worse -- because the Water Gap is pretty mellow. It was like white rapids. It was unbelievable.

I might be incorrect -- we may have shut down at 3:00 that day.

BF: Because you were expecting something.

BG: Yes. It was the 29th. I remember signing in that day.

BF: Well, you can clarify that when we look at the transcript. Okay. We're signing off.

