

## **Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society**

**Interviewee:** Raymond Cook (RC), Christa Cook (CC), Kirsten Meneghello (KM), Lucy Meneghello (LM)  
**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)  
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TM: Today is the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, 2014, we are at the Shrine of the Ages for the wreath laying in commemoration of the 1956 United Airlines/Trans World Airlines disaster over Chuar Butte in Grand Canyon. Today in this interview, we have...

RC: Raymond Cook.

TM: And his wife...

CC: Christa Cook.

TM: And their daughter.

KM: Kirsten Meneghello.

TM: And her daughter/ granddaughter.

LM: Lucy Meneghello.

TM: My name is Tom Martin, and so to begin this interview, as we were walking over here, Raymond, you told me something which I asked you...Say that again for the tape.

RC: All right. I think that there is an absence of awareness, I guess, of the impact that a disaster has on families, and particularly a national disaster. The event happens, and there's a big hoopla about what occurred, the press. The real tragedy to me is that ongoing, the number of people that are affected over time. And there is no counseling, it's forgotten, the event's forgotten pretty quickly, but the impact goes on with families. I think it's just sad that people are unaware of the tremendous impact and how people are affected over time, and there is no recording of that. There is no history of what's occurred. That's part of why I wanted to do this recording, because I want to share some of the impact it's had on our family and others.

I remember I was twelve years old when my father was killed. I didn't think I would be affected emotionally today, but...It grabs me, unfortunately, the memory of it. I'll start with that day. I was at a friend's house, playing baseball. He wanted to try a different experiment and the experiment was to use a baseball bat to hit a basketball, of all things. So he did it a few times and he said "You try it." So I grabbed a baseball bat and hit a basketball. When I hit the basketball, the bat whacked back and hit me in the head and put a big knot on my head. It was a Friday. My dad was due back from a business trip

that he'd volunteered to do. He was going to change companies, he was going to be the vice president of a new company. He was an extremely successful chemical engineer. He had had dinner with Elroy Hirsch, who was a famous member of the Los Angeles Rams, the night before he boarded the aircraft.

Anyway, I got home and there was a big to-do. There were neighbors over, the house was filled with people. It was probably six or seven in the evening and they said that my dad's plane was missing and don't touch the telephone. They had the phone off the hook and they were talking to United Airlines. They didn't have any more information other than the plane was missing. Later, as the evening progressed, they were able to discover that another plane was missing. A TWA plane was missing as well. There was some indication that they saw some wreckage that they think might have been the TWA aircraft, but they had no sighting of the United at all. So we went to bed with the thought of the unknown. I kind of knew in my mind, since the plane hadn't shown up, that he probably had perished in the accident.

The next day, I guess, and I don't remember exactly when, but the next day we were told that they had seen some wreckage from what appeared to be the United aircraft. They had fully established the TWA aircraft, they had discovered that. They were in very difficult places to get to and it was not going to be easy to get to the remains. They had done some flybys and it didn't appear that anyone had survived. As the days progressed, the next couple of days, they realized they really couldn't get to the United Airlines wreckage, so they were going to bring in some Swiss climbers to try to access and get to the site to see if anyone had survived, perhaps. They'd gotten to the TWA and begun to bring the remains out. This whole process went on for a week or so and then, the next thing I remember, they said that there was going to be a funeral out at the Grand Canyon and that some of the remains weren't going to be identified and it appeared that my father was not going to be part of that.

My mother was on pins and needles, I guess. My grandparents came to visit and stay with us. Other relatives called. I remember it was not established, obviously, that he was deceased. Eventually, after a few weeks, the United representative came to our home. It was morning, early in the morning, and it was my mother, my grandfather, my grandmother and myself. There were two men from United who came and told my mother that my father had perished in the accident and they weren't able to identify his body, and that he would be buried in the Grand Canyon. My mother just totally, utterly collapsed. It was a horrific thing to see somebody that devastated. She cursed my father for passing away and leaving her stuck with three kids. My grandmother tried to console her, but she was inconsolable. So for most of that day, she cried and sobbed and eventually got a grip, but it took quite a while. I realized the impact it had on her. And as I mentioned earlier, the impact is unknown, but what happened to her, within a year she had a hysterectomy and they thought it was caused by stress. That she couldn't deal with it.

So eventually we flew out to the Canyon, we actually flew to Denver. My grandmother and grandfather came out. I had two uncles that also came out. Then we flew from Denver to Winslow, I believe, and then bused in from Winslow for the event. Today was kind of a reminder of that whole thing. The difference was that there was more seating, obviously, there was more flowers and, just like at our home the day after the accident, a lot of press.

The day after the accident, I forgot to say this, that morning we got up and there were probably a hundred to a hundred fifty people from the press on our front lawn. And trucks and all that kind of good stuff. My mother said "Don't go outside, don't talk to them, nobody talk to them." Why, I don't know. But anyway, we had a family friend, forgot their name...Fosty, Ruth Fosty. My mother assigned her to talk to the press. Huge mistake. Ruth gave totally false information, none of it was correct, so that got

into the press. Then my mother was irate with Ruth Fosty for... She said then, "Nobody can talk to the press!" So nobody talked to the press. Eventually after about three or four days, they dwindled down to nothing and they were gone. I do remember that part of it. Anyway, we came out to the Canyon and the same thing this morning. I remember at the entrance to the cemetery, all the press was kept back away from the event because it was in Life magazine, now it was a big deal, you know. Everybody in the United States knew about this accident. It was the largest aviation disaster in the country. You couldn't run from it. Everybody's in your face about it, you know, "How do you feel?"

I remember I played Little League baseball. I was a pitcher and when I didn't pitch, I played in the outfield, I played left field. Just standing up in left field and just feeling this empty wrenching in my gut that I wouldn't see my dad again, and it hurt so bad. But I had to go on. They said, "You don't have to play." I thought, "Well, you've got to play, you can't stop life, you've got to go on." So life went on.

We came out here and that day at the cemetery, the cemetery was hard because one of the women, I'm guessing one of the wives of one of the deceased, lost it. She couldn't stop sobbing and crying and she jumped on the grave and it was a mess. Of course, the press loved it, because there was a big to-do about it. It was hard for the rest of us because we were trying to sit there quietly and just remember. It was just a horrific scene. But we got through all that. It passed. We kept in touch with Paul Boyd, who was our representative from United Airlines. Wonderful fellow, took great care of our family and making sure we came out to the event and got back home safely. Then he kept in touch with my mother about possible litigation and stuff. As it turned out, we sued United and TWA.

We had a trial, I'm guessing about a year and a half later out in Los Angeles. Los Angeles Superior Court is interesting because our courtroom was right next to the divorce of Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds. Their courtroom was right next to ours, so talk about press and not escaping. Here's this big divorce deal, and here we are having this lawsuit over the deal. My mother hired a... Her mother worked for the Santa Fe Railway and she was head of the Women's Railway Association. So we hired an attorney with the Railway Association who had some history of dealing with tragic events. He also charged a discounted fee, a half fee, to represent us in the lawsuit. We sued both United and TWA. I remember meeting with him in Los Angeles several times pre-trial. We were out there for a month before the trial began, I guess, going over all the events. They were bringing in experts and pilots and all this kind of stuff for the trial.

Then the trial began, and of course we were told not to talk to the attorneys from United or TWA. Even when you're in the bathroom, they might say hello, don't say hello back. Couldn't talk to them. It was kind of strange. At that time, all litigation fell in favor of the companies. There weren't people who sued for damages, it didn't happen. If you did you were an outcast. So it was kind of an odd deal. Then we got a judge who, for whatever reason, favored the airlines. Eventually he was disbarred by the Supreme Court for his activities in this trial. They were so prejudicial. But as the trial wore on, I was supposed to testify. We didn't get to that point, we settled out of court. They settled for \$100,000 between TWA and United and we went back home. And, you know, it was behind us, and life goes on.

Very shortly after that period of time, my mother realized she couldn't deal with three children. I had an older brother, David, and a younger sister, Susan. My brother was a year and a half older, my sister was three years younger than me. My mother couldn't deal with three kids, it was too much. She asked me earlier one summer if I would be willing to go away to school. I said, "No, I don't want to go away to school. Why me?" She said, "Well, Susan's in an odd grade and David's about to go to college and I just

can't handle all three of you children." I said okay. So I thought about it for a while and I thought, "Well, if that's what you really want, if that's the only way of surviving, then I'll go."

So we went and interviewed at Wayland Academy, which is probably the finest private school in the United States. Everybody who attends there is an oil baron and everybody has a chauffeur with a Mercedes. You can't just "get in." So I went and interviewed and did get in. I attended there for a year and a half and I hated it. I was first in my class. As a sophomore I played starting quarterback for the football team. The headmaster, Ray Patterson, eventually became the president of the Houston Rockets. Just to show the influence these people had. My basketball coach was Tom Nissalke. He was the only NBA coach to win Coach of the Year in the NBA and the ABA. I think he still does commentary for Utah. So anyway, I knew all these famous people. I could have stayed at that school and gone to MIT and done all kinds of things, but I realized I didn't want to. I didn't like the limelight I couldn't get back in the limelight again. I hated it and I wanted to be an average person. I didn't want to live like that. So after a year and a half my brother then was in college and I was able to go back home and became basically an average student in a public school.

But I carried the... At that point I lost my family. I didn't have the interaction with my brother or sister that I once had. I felt like I was an outcast. They were strangers when I went back home. So at twelve, basically, I lost my family. I didn't have a family. I was alone. When I went back, I did everything. I cooked the food. If we had to tile the basement floor, I did it. We had to paint the garage, I did it. I did all the landscaping, I did everything. I was it. I was my own family. I took care of them. So my wife sometimes wonders, "Why don't you want to do this around the house or that around the house," I've done it. I had to do it. I had to do it to survive. So you grow up early, I guess. I realize now I was scarred emotionally and just always felt alone. I've carried that all my life.

I don't know, the next chapter. I remember we had a maid. I don't remember the maid's name, a black woman. She drank and she used to steal my mother's liquor. My mother caught her doing it. Winnie was her name. She eventually fired her because she was drinking. But I was fascinated with, why do you drink? So I started stealing some liquor when I was thirteen, fourteen years old. A little, not too much. She told me how Winnie poured water in to cover up the booze she drank. Then my mother started marking the bottles, it was a little game. But I had a few drinks and I thought, "Oh, that's not bad. Something to do."

It goes back to Wayland Academy. It was in Milwaukee and we lived in Detroit. I'd take a train from Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, where the school was located, down to Milwaukee and then fly home. Taking the train down, there was a pretty blonde gal among three or four of us who would take the train down to Milwaukee. She said "Oh, I drink. Will you have a few drinks going down?" So here I was, fourteen years old, I got drunk. I mean, I was drunk. Got on the plane drunk, got sick on the plane. It intrigued me, the feeling of... Sorry, Lucy, I'm telling you what not to do. But it intrigued me, the feeling of escape of the liquor. I didn't do a lot of that. As I went back to school, and I went now to Ferndale High School, I started in my junior year. Somebody's got to get the beer for the guys or whatever. We'd play football on the weekends. I looked older, so I'd get the beer and started drinking more at an early age.

That was reinforced later in the Marine Corps, where everybody drinks. I think everybody that's a marine is basically drunk most of the time. That's the manly, badass thing to do. Which I did, and took me on the road to basically a semi-alcoholic one way or another, which I eventually realized. Nothing I was proud of, that's for sure. It was just a way of getting through the day. It's that simple, I was lost. I started dating a girl in high school. The only reason I dated her was she had a family. I didn't have a

family. So we kind of “went together,” but I didn’t even like the girl. I liked the fact that she had a couple of uncles that were a couple years older. I could play golf with them. She had a sister. I knew her father, he was an engineer, and I could kind of relate to that. So I felt like this is, you know, a family. But I still drank too much.

Then, got out of the Marine Corps. Let me tell you about a Marine Corps experience that I related to somebody earlier. It’s kind of odd, but... Originally, with this accident, they blamed an air controller at Needles, Arizona for the accident. They said it was his fault. As it turns out, it wasn’t, but they blamed him. I met his son in the Marine Corps. I was a navigator in KC130F and he was a radio operator. His name was Jerry Gary. We discussed the accident and his father’s role in it, who was later cleared of any wrongdoing. We had flights together and got to know each other. One day I had a bunch of flights up to Japan and back, they were called shuttles, and we kept losing an outboard engine. Eventually I was able to get off the flight because I had done my time for the day. I remember throwing my headset against a locker, saying I was glad to be off this flight because we kept losing this outboard engine, going off the edge of the runway, they were going to fix it, they didn’t fix it. It wears on you, not staying on the runway, especially when you’re flying off of islands. It’s dangerous stuff. So anyway, I got off that flight and Jerry got on it as the radio operator. We flew down to Danang, Vietnam and then up into Hong Kong, which was a normal run for us. Coming out of Hong Kong, it’s an airstrip, at that time, it was just a strip in the middle of Hong Kong Bay. They tried to take off but lost the outboard engine, the pilot said “I’ve got it.” They had flight mechanics that didn’t abort the flight. They got up to about a thousand feet and then dunked it into the Hong Kong Bay. Jerry Gary died along with 51 other people. That was tragic to me. Kind of ironic and weird. I still remember it. I’ve been to the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C. and had the ability to touch his name. I lost other friends, but that was a unique story relative to this accident.

TM: Raymond, how did this impact your mother, then?

RC: She became an alcoholic. She died at 51 in an automobile accident. She went over an embankment, and died as an alcoholic. She never got over the accident. I had a brother, older brother, who shot himself, drunk. Became an alcoholic and committed suicide, living with my wife and I. The only solace I have in my life really was my current wife. I met her when I was 25 years old and married. She stuck with me through all of these times. She’s just been a solid source to me of peace, even though I’ve had some terrible days. I drank until I was probably 40 years old and I haven’t drank since, last 30 years. I just don’t drink because I know how disastrous it is. But as I said, I lost my family, but I think all our family members lost our family. And that’s the tragedy of it, and there’s no way to explain it. We couldn’t even talk about it. It was sad. I hadn’t really talked about some of it until today. One reason to do it, my wife lived it, unfortunately, thank you for being there. I’m sure my daughters, you know, having gone through all that stuff. I suffered from PTSD and got treatment from the VA, eventually. It helped a lot because it made me realize the emotional impact of the whole thing. I felt bad for my daughters because I wasn’t the father I should have been. A lot of things I should have done differently, because I drank too much and did the wrong things and didn’t do the right things. But I can’t change that. I was trying to survive my days. It was hard.

That’s most of it, I guess. You know, again, I just feel bad for families. I saw people today out there. I didn’t think they would be emotional, but they were emotional, too. I have to think in my mind, they have their stories, and they probably aren’t any prettier than mine. That’s the way life is sometimes, but you just go on.

CC: Can I add something right now to this interview? Ray mentioned to me several times about a dream you've always had. You remember, about your father? Maybe you just want to add that, I think it would be nice to the story.

RC: Yeah, I'm glad you said that. It's funny, from the time right after he passed away, for years, every day I would dream my father would walk out of the Grand Canyon and he would come out sunburned and worn, and say "I'm here. They didn't find me, but I've been here. Here I am." I for years had that dream. But I often thought... I talked to my grandmother a little about this, his mother. I think it helped my belief in God because I thought a lot of times I talked to my dad. That helped me believe that there was more to this world than we know. That gave me some comfort, I think, that it was okay.

The only thing I felt bad about from my father, really, as a result of other accidents now, they said at the time that he didn't suffer. That the impact probably, they had a big decompression, and they would have been knocked out in a matter of seconds and would have not known what had happened to them. I don't believe that's true at all. I think he was very much aware and they probably rode it right into the ground and were very much aware of what's happening. The reason I say that is, an example would be recently, there was a fellow that jumped into the wheel well of an aircraft and went from California to Hawaii in the wheel well at 35,000 feet and survived. So what that says to me, decompression or no decompression, at 21,000 feet you can't breathe very well, but you can have your senses about you. My guess is, and I feel that the sadness I have, is his terror and the terror of the other passengers, that oh my God it's over. It's a hell of a way to fall, 21,000 feet to your death. So I think they all died a terrible death, no matter what we're told. I think that, I don't believe anything else other than that. But thanks for mentioning it to me.

CC: You're welcome.

RC: Thinking of it, and I still think of it. Not as often. I didn't think today, I really did not think today I would get emotional. I didn't, I really didn't.

CC: No, you said the 50<sup>th</sup> was a really big time, was a very special time.

RC: I thought I kind of put it behind me and it wouldn't affect me. When I saw other people affected, it kind of grabbed me. While this is, I'm sure boring to Lucy, someday 50 years from now, you'll remember this day. When we aren't here, it'll be interesting to you, I think, 50 years from now. Like it is interesting for me sitting here today.

TM: And what this brings closure for me is suddenly realizing it wasn't just 128 individuals, but the impact was to mothers, to parents, to sons, to future family.

RC: That's right.

CC: We traveled a long way.

RC: Absolutely.

CC: The pain and suffering.

TM: Absolutely, and as you pointed out, we were not good at addressing that in 1956. I think we're some better here today. Today, when there is an incident like this, the first responders have someone to

talk to right away, the family, et cetera. You mentioned PTSD and the VA finally coming around to address this, where in the past we just did not talk about it.

RC: There's one other thing that's always hidden in the back of my mind, that kind of gets to me a little bit. My mother died broke. Which, quite frankly, pisses me off. Her family members took advantage of her, took the money, and she gave it to them. They lied to her to get it, doesn't matter. But one other thing is the amount of money she got from the settlement was peanuts. Here's where it kind of makes me mad, because it affected my family and my children, is that we sued the airlines and my mother represented me as a child. I wasn't compensated for my family and my children. I think that's wrong, that we shouldn't have the opportunity to go back to the airlines and seek damages that are even reasonably current today to take care of our families. Because, supposedly, that was going to take care of our families for the rest of our lives. It was a joke. It was peanuts. And, anyway, I just want to go on the record that I find that's not fair, wasn't fair.

TM: I get a sense of injustice throughout this whole interview. The damage clearly destroyed your mother, your brother...

RC: Me.

TM: You. I, as an impartial observer, I look at you with a wonderful wife, your daughter's here, your granddaughter's here. You've done pretty good!

RC: I was lucky, it's because of my wife! Nothing I've done, it's all them. Thank you.

CC: We love you.

TM: Yeah, thank you for what you did to sort this out, basically on your own. Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down today and let us know this. I'd kind of like to leave this open-ended, meaning we're not stopping here, life goes on. As you keep processing this, you keep thinking of things, you write this down and send it in to Kim Besom. Do you have her e-mail?

RC: I do.

TM: Because the museum collection...to have your story...clearly, there was a whole series of events that happened, and a whole series of events that should have happened that didn't, as far as sorting this all out.

RC: Thanks for the opportunity. I'm grateful for the chance to tell someone about our family and our history and the event and how it affected us. I'm grateful for that. It's cathartic in a way, I mean, to get it out and get rid of it. So thanks, I appreciate the opportunity.

TM: Thank you, I think you've done clearly well given what happened. And you're not alone. I mean, just in a couple minutes, I had talked to someone else, they said that they were four and things really changed. (To Lucy) How old are you?

LM: Twelve.

RC: That's how old I was when he passed away.

TM: So...she goes away. Think about that, just put this into perspective for you. Your mom just disappears. That's what Ray had to...when Dad disappeared. So, just try to put that into perspective of what that means.

KM: How your life changes.

RC: Yeah, it's interesting, at the 50-year reunion, there was another family member, Sally, I don't remember her last name. Her dad was on the TWA aircraft, and I asked her, we didn't get into this whole discussion, but I said, "How was your family impacted?" I said it basically destroyed our family and she said, "It destroyed ours as well." That's what I was referring to, walking over here and initially what I said in this interview, is I don't think people get it. I really don't, I think there's a lot to do when an event happens or somebody passes away, but it's the long-lasting implication of that that really isn't documented. It's the part that needs to be addressed somehow. And it's missed. More than anything, it's just missed. And that's the sad part.

TM: And you're capturing that right here. Thank you.

RC: Yeah. Any other questions?

CC: You did great, Raymond.

RC: One thing...well, I want to do this. Christa, how did it impact you?

CC: Well, let me start, I think from the beginning when I met Ray, he was a wonderful person. Then I think going through our early years of marriage, with his drinking and all and talking about the disaster that had happened in his life with his father passing and the air crash disaster, I think I got a better insight to more and more of what was going on in him. I never did it. But through the years, I think I could feel more of his pain and anguish, and just stood by him. We have a great family.

RC: And Kirsten, I remember you telling me once, and this is the type of thing that just, it's a dagger in my heart, but its life. Christa would work on Saturdays at her mother's bridal salon, and I'd have to take care of the girls. Kirsten said to me once, "Kim and I knew you hated taking care of us." It was because it was such a struggle for me. It was terrible.

KM: Because you didn't know how to do it.

RC: No, I didn't. But let me ask the question I just asked your mom: how did my behavior impact you as a child?

KM: Well, I mean, in countless ways. I don't want to make you feel bad about it now. At the time you didn't know any better, I think...

RC: I won't feel bad about it. You've got to be real here.

KM: I know, but I had gone through my own counseling to kind of sort out my own childhood issues and recognizing and forgiving you for the fact that you went through what you did. Each of us, we only come to each situation with the tools we have available to us. So, you know, you weren't emotionally whole to be present, to be a father. So I forgive you for that. I feel like we did that work to kind of make peace with what that was. But, you know, you weren't around a lot, and when you were, I think you always



just seemed preoccupied with other things. As a child, you take that as, well, the person doesn't love me or care about me. But as an adult I see it for you were dealing with your own stuff.

RC: Yep.

KM: I get that. Emotionally, it feels different as a child. Then it was hard seeing Uncle Dave come live with us. Then when he killed himself, that was a very traumatic night. I don't relive it, but I have strong memories from that time when I was eight.

TM: As your family's advocate, I'm going to jump in here and say what you're telling me, my father told me. Meaning, I didn't know how to raise kids. He felt inadequate, so I think part of this may be, I don't mean to be giving any excuses, but just being a father, what kind of training do we get with this? So I think you've done really well, I just want you to know.

RC: The results are good.

TM: I just want to thank you so very, very much.

RC: No, thank you. My pleasure.

TM: One of the things that you might want to do is stay close with Kim. I don't know if you can get over to the museum collection, she's got a couple pieces there you've got to look at. I don't know if that's something you're interested in actually just touching.

RD: I have. I've had the chance to go to the accident, to the confluence, and have some pictures of that. So I've been with some of the wreckage.

TM: Thank you so much.

CC: And thank you for taking the time.