TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ricks College
Idaho State Historical Society
History Department, Utah State University

TETON DAM DISASTER

Arthur Hubscher
Interviewed by
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COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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[Interviewee's Signature]

Date
S: Would you please spell your full name?
H: Arthur Ronald Hubscher.
S: Where were you born?
H: I was born in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
S: How long have you lived here in the Rexburg area?
H: About eleven years.
S: How old are you?
H: Forty-four.
S: Do you have a family?
H: Yes.
S: What sized family do you have?
H: There is me, my wife and six children. At the time of the flood there were only five children.
S: What was your address at the time of the flood?
H: 517 West Main, Rexburg.
S: Is this your present address also?
H: Yes, it is my permanent address.
S: What do you do for a living?
H: I teach chemistry at Ricks College.
S: Do you own your own home?
H: I'm buying it.
S: Are you involved in any other kind of business such as farming or managing a shop of any type?
H: No, but I do have a little property at St. Anthony that we are subdividing into lots at the present time.

S: When they considered building the Teton Dam, there was a certain amount of controversy, were you aware of the controversy?

H: Somewhat, yes.

S: Did you have an opinion?

H: Nor really, I felt slightly favorable towards the dam being built. I thought it would be good for the area. We do need the water for the crops in the area.

S: But as far as taking an active part in the controversy, you didn't?

H: No, I had no active part in the controversy.

S: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton Dam disaster?

H: No, we didn't.

S: Where were you and your family when the dam broke?

H: We were at home. My wife was in the house doing the regular housework and the children were around, thank goodness. I was in back preparing the ground to build a greenhouse. However, the greenhouse isn't built yet. I was suddenly interrupted in my endeavors.

S: Do you remember how you found out that the dam had broke?

H: I found out when one of my children turned the television set on. I walked inside and on the television set there was a great big red flashing scene and they said that the Teton Dam had broken and we had better leave very quickly.

S: What was your reaction?

H: At first I really didn't believe it. It was a little incredulous to me and I thought maybe it wasn't quite as serious as it turned out to be.

S: What was your reaction, what did you do?
Hubscher

H: At this point, I called my family together and told them that the Teton Dam had burst. I put on the radio and I heard it on the radio that there was a problem and we had better evacuate pretty quickly. One of the first things we did was to run downstairs and take a few things out. We felt that danger was imminent so we quickly gathered our family together. As we were getting our family together people ran from across the way and told us of the disaster and warned us. We saw a bunch of cars tearing down the highway in front of our place heading towards high ground. We got into our car and I took my radio to keep track of what was going on and dashed up to the Ricks College hill.

S: Did you try and save any household or personal belongings?

H: No.

S: What did you take with you as you went up to the hill?

H: We took our family, we took the car, we took the radio.

S: No clothes or food?

H: No clothes, food, nothing.

S: Did you see the flood coming?

H: Yes, I did. What we first did, as soon as we got up to Ricks College, we went into the Manwaring Center where the crowds were gathering, they assigned my family a place to stay in the dorms that night. Then I volunteered my services. I'm an emergency medical technician. I offered my services if they needed me and they asked me to go down to the Madison County Hospital, which I did. There was very little activity there. I went onto the roof of the Madison County Hospital and from there I had an excellent view of the oncoming flood.

S: What kind of things did you see? How would you describe the flood?

H: At first it was very quiet and peaceful. I could see in the northeast this heavy, brown, ugly, mass of water slowly coming towards me. You could see way over and then as it came closer and closer. Interestingly enough it clopped. The front part of the flood was shallow but it got deeper and deeper.
I could see that. Trees were slowly being inundated as the flood progressed. The highway in front of the flood had cars on it. Cars were tearing down on the highway ahead of the flood. You could see them trying to escape the onrushing waters. In the distance I could see horses and cattle running along major fences trying to avoid the oncoming waters. As the flood came along, it would engulf them. You could see the animals in the distance being buried by the coming water. They couldn't get in front of it because of the fences that were in the way. As it came closer and closer I could see houses collapsing and being floated off their foundations and swimming down the main stream. I could see the main stream of the south Teton Fork at a very good vantage point. I saw houses floating down it just like boats. I saw other houses being lifted off their foundations and being floated hither and yon. The edge of the flood was thrashing to the side of sloping ground. Police cars were running back and forth in front of me. The police were, through their bullhorns, telling people to evacuate their houses. For a moment there was concern that the flood waters were so deep that it might even begin to come up to the Madison County Hospital where I was. For a moment there people were thinking of evacuating the hospital. It was felt that it might be that bad.

I saw a cow standing on the edge of a big pit. She stood there not knowing what to do. As the waters came, at first it covered her feet, then her knees and then the cow was washed into the pit. You could see a water fall as the water poured into the pit and filled it up with water. After that I went down to the water's edge. Lots of people were crowded around the edge. I saw this poor cow just tearing along all excited. Apparently she was lost and didn't know where to go. People were a little upset at what was going on. To me, at the time, it was the most fascinating experience to see this slow-grade, moving hell pass through the town of Rexburg.
I met one of the local doctors and hopped into his car and ran up and down the edge of the flood. We traveled down to 4th South and 2nd East where the water was still rising. We could see the waters pouring into basements of houses. We went back out and I met my family and told them of the place where they could stay the night.

An hour later we went back down to the corner of 4th South and 2nd West and could see that the waters were beginning to recede. The water was not there that long. From there, we went up to the hill where the new stake center was and looked for my house. I couldn’t see it. I was a little concerned that my house may have been washed away. That evening I was informed that my house was still there.

S: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences during the flood?
H: No, I can’t think of any.
S: You went to the college and got housing, how long did you stay at the college dorms?
H: We stayed there about seven weeks.
S: Then you were able to move back into your home?
H: Yes.
S: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property?
H: I was able to go back the following Sunday morning. The waters had receded and we went back and I saw my house.
S: What did you see?
H: It was a mess. There was a lot of debris piled up in my front yard. I could see where the waterline had reached to my house. I had three young trees I had planted in front of my home and a car came and floated down and knocked down all three trees and was situated on top of the third one. The first thing I did was to upright the two trees. I couldn’t do anything about the tree that had the car on it.
I opened up my door and walked into my house and I saw that the entire floor was covered with about half inch of mud. The floodwaters had come in on the main floor to a height of fourteen inches which I measured precisely.

S: What was your reaction to this?

H: I was a little relieved that the house didn't look too bad at the time. It looked wet and dirty. I didn't realize the damage at the time. I was glad to see that my house was still there in one piece. I didn't think it would take too long to get it back in shape.

S: What was the condition of the homes around you?

H: Very similar to mine. About the same. The water had flooded the basements completely and come up to the main floor. The houses north of me were in real bad shape. It looked like they were a bunch of balls knocked over on a billiard table because they were tight in line with the sawmill and logs came through there and just ripped those houses all to smithereens. They were really piled up. East, west and south of me the houses were in pretty much the same condition as mine was. The basement was completely flooded. Then I looked at my basement, it was still over half filled with water and was very damp and still dripping down there. I was in direct line of a horse farm because I dug into the mud in front of my place I saw little lumps of horse manure and it smelt like it too.

S: But you believed that you could get back into your home at that point. You weren't afraid that the house would have to be destroyed?

H: I felt that the house did not need to be destroyed.

S: What was the damages suffered as a result of the flood?

H: Personal or property?

S: Total.

H: Total, the county assessed my house as having major damage because of a large crack found in one of my basement walls. They told me that if I had
damage more than $9,000 from what it actually was, it would have been totaled. It was considered a major damage. Property damage was around $19,000 when it was taken in for consideration. Personal damage was about another $13,000.

S: What was the most cherished item you lost?

H: Perhaps the most cherished items would be the ones that are irreplaceable. Some of my wife's pictures. These other things the government could replace them and we were grateful, but some things they could not replace such things as photographs my wife had, perhaps are the most irreplaceable.

S: Before you were aware that the government would come in and help, did you feel that you would have to rebuild on your own and confident that you could do it on your own?

H: Yes, I was concerned. I felt that if the government did not come in and help, I would be in very dire straits. It would be very hard. I would have to live a lower standard of living. I felt secure that I could keep my job at the college. The college would be rather compasionate towards me. But we would not be able to live in circumstances to which we had been accustomed. It would be like a hovel.

S: Did you ever have any feelings of giving up as you saw the muck, mess and destruction?

H: No, no feeling of giving up ever approached me. However, a week after, when the awesomeness of it suddenly thrust itself upon me, I realized how little headway I was making in getting my house back in order, I did feel very depressed. At one time I did sit down and just cry over the whole thing. I just sat down a bawled and then I got over that.

S: Got it out of your system?

H: Yes.

S: How did you go about cleaning up your property?
H: The very first thing I did was to quickly open up all the doors and windows and scrape all the mud off the floors and ripped up the carpets. I felt that the first thing I had better do was to preserve my main floor. So I ripped up the carpets and threw them outside. I went downstairs and ripped all the insulation off the basement ceiling. I opened up everything in order to let the hot June air get in there and dry out the house. The inspection people came later on and said this may have been the thing that saved the house by preserving the main floor so it didn't buckle or warp.

S: Were there any problems with cleaning up or repairing that you found to be frustrating?

H: Yes, the time it took to clean up my basement was frustrating. It was very slow work. This is when I felt low and I sat down and cried. The thing that helped me was when the large numbers of volunteers came in and started cleaning up my basement for me, and my garage, and main floor. This was a tremendous help. I don't think I could have gotten the house cleaned up on my own. It couldn't have been done. These crews came in and that really did it.

S: Did you receive quite a bit of volunteer help then?

H: You bet. We received a lot of volunteer help. This was the thing that I needed mostly at the time in getting the house back in order, was the body of help that wanted to cleanup.

S: Were these local people or were they people outside of the area?

H: They were people from outside the area. The local people had their own problems. They couldn't help me and I couldn't help them.

S: Were these some of the people that the church brought in or were they others?

H: It was mostly what the church brought in. It was a church initiated program. It was done under their direction.

S: Did you have any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

H: The only uplifting experience was the great help that the volunteer services gave me. In order to protect my own sanity I decided I would not refuse to
have any ups or downs in order to keep my head level. I deliberately avoided
having any great spiritual experiences or experiences of despair. I wanted
to keep it at a level tone and tried to keep it cold and indifferent.

S: Were you successful in doing that?
H: Yes.
S: How about your family, were they like that?
H: Pretty much. They did follow my lead. My wife was taking it pretty good.
I think she is emotionally capable of handling disasters. The oldest boy was
there and it didn't mean that much to him. He was really aware that something
was going on. My other children were transported to my wife's uncle in Jerome.
They were there. I think when they being displaced there, perhaps may have
initiated some help from that area coming up when they saw those children there.

S: Did you have family outside of the area that came in and gave you some help?
H: Yes, some of my wife's relatives came in. They were under the direction of
the church program, volunteer help. It so happened that they showed up at
the same place where my wife--I had to work, I was teaching summer school--
my wife, each morning, would go and get volunteer help. It was coincidental
that some of her relatives showed up. She picked them out of the crowd and
asked if they would help at the place and they did. One was her sister and
the other was her brother-in-law.

S: Did you suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?
H: No, we did not suffer anything like that.
S: What kind of aid did you receive immediately after the flood?
H: The first immediate aid was the housing and the food that was offered to me
at Ricks College. That was the very first that I got.

S: You took meals at the college?
H: Yes, I did. The first immediate aid was that and then a week or then days
later came with the volunteer help by the church. The church obviously was the very first that gave me the help and the aid.

S: How about other agencies? Did you receive any assistance from Red Cross?

H: Yes, we did. My wife went to these agencies and put us in on anything she could. The Red Cross was very good also. They gave us aid very quickly, like formulas and diapers. The Red Cross was in there, too, giving us little thing like this before our children left for Jerome. Later on, we then got aid the Red Cross gave us money for food and clothing which we used. After that things seemed to settle down. I found that for a place to stay in and food to eat I was okay. Later on I found I needed money to build my place out. The logical place to go to was the SBA because I felt that this seemed to be the agency designed at the time by the government where they could get money into my hands in a hurry to start repairing my home. I approached these people and they were very generous with us. They gave us money that I thought was more than adequate at the time to start rebuilding the home. They came at the right time when I needed them for this to be done. I used the SBA loan money to buy the materials and help I needed to start my building program. Later on, when things were going, I then submitted my claim.

S: What was the attitude of these people who offered you assistance like the Red Cross, church group for instance?

H: Very good. I had very good feelings with them all. There was little rancor. All these people seemed to be compassionate. They tried to do their work with helpfulness, with integrity; helpfulness to me and integrity to the taxpayer.

S: What other government agencies did you deal with?

H: Small Business Administration and the Bureau of Reclamation were the only two governmental agencies that I had to necessary deal with, also HUD. Later on I hear that I will have to deal with the Internal Revenue Service. That's in the future.
S: How would you evaluate these two agencies that you did deal with as to their effectiveness?

H: They were good. They were doing their job and they did it efficiently, compassionately and I have no complaints.

S: Did you have any reason to deal with county or state authorities?

H: Yes, I did. I dealt with the county authorities. They were working with Forsgren and Perkins and I wanted the county authorities to come up and look at my house and assess the damage in order that I could have some type of information of knowledge on how bad my damage was because I felt my confidence in assessing it was limited. I could use this information to make up my claim. This is the help I received from the county.

S: Were they pretty good to help you?

H: Yes, they were more than helpful. There was an engineer, Mullins, he drove over to give me a good, fair, general assessment on my property. I felt that he was very fair with me. I used his assessments to help make out my claim plus I used two private contractors to make out a thing on my home, too.

S: As time progressed, did you find more damage to your home than you had originally anticipated?

H: Yes, I did. Things kept popping up. I think I have pretty well sized up most of the damage. I delayed in putting in my claim because I was working on the SBA loan and that gave me a breather to assist the damage more intelligently so I could put in my claim. I still have found things since I put my claim in, but rather of a minor nature.

S: Do you feel that any who assisted in the recovery might have taken advantage of either you or the government?

H: In one tiny trivial thing, I didn't think it was that important. Some of the volunteers ran off with a couple of my tools. The only advantage that I can think of that comes to my mind.
S: Without divulging names are you aware of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

H: I've heard of one case where a couple of students filed claims on personal possessions above and beyond what they ought to, but I haven't heard of any specific names. My feeling is that most people did not file as much as they ought to have done. That's why I've heard they've delayed a little bit. I also heard that the Bureau of Reclamation was getting a little sticky there for awhile with some claims that would be handed in earlier, then they had a change of leadership and they were much better to deal with. When I put my claim in I got everything I asked for.

S: They didn't cut you?

H: No, no cut. The verifier, he gave me an interesting statement. He said, my claim is what I might have expected, he felt in round terms that I wasn't being short changed nor was the government being taken advantage of. It worked out to about what he would have figured it.

S: Do you feel that the flood was a divine punishment, a natural disaster or a man-made disaster?

H: I feel that it was a man-made disaster.

S: You don't see the hand of the Lord in it then?

H: No, there might have been. Yes, to some extent the timing of the flood, it came early on a June morning when everyone was alert and He might have had a hand in that. There are certainly some outcomes. I haven't decided whether or not the Lord had a hand in it. I don't think He caused the flood but I think He modified things to reduce the loss of life when it did come. I think there were no correlations between the individual's righteousness and the damage to his property. However, the government did help us to get back on our feet. The church did learn a lot from this.

S: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt?
H: I don't know. Certainly, if we are going to rebuild it, we had better do a much better job than they did before. Obviously, it is not the ideal location. I feel that if they ever rebuild it, they will be much more careful next time and use a lot more common sense. I hear from everybody that they cut corners. I haven't made up my mind definitely. It would be nice to have a dam there I believe, be a nice playground in the area, but I haven't made any definite opinion one way or the other. I'm not strongly antagonistic or having it built or am I strongly in favor of it.

S: Has the disaster changed your life at all?

H: Basically, no. I still have the same job I'm doing. It gives me a little more understanding of what people go through that have had a disaster. When I hear of disasters in other parts of the world, I can reflect it in terms of my own and have a good understanding of how these people feel. I don't think it has basically changed my life.

S: How has your family adjusted?

H: They have adjusted to it quite well. The children are quite pliable and adjusted to it very well. My wife has too. It's been a little harder on us because we've had to work harder to get our place back in order.

S: But you are not feeling any ill effects at this point?

H: No, the recompense we've had has offset any bitter feelings.

S: Is your family closer as result of the flood?

H: I don't think they are any closer or more further apart than they were.

S: You don't see any real change in them?

H: No real change. As far as my spiritual development and emotional development is concerned, this is the way that I had planned it. I did not look or seek for or try to attain any spiritual change in my own personality. I didn't want to be any more or less spiritual because of the flood.

S: How has it affected the community?
H: The community is going back to what it was before. I don't think it was affected greatly. It seemed that the government was quite generous in paying for their damages. Although we don't hold them liable, we felt like they were accountable and they came through. They canceled out the effect of the flood. I think I deliberately refused to have a basic change in my spiritual feelings because of the flood, primarily so that I wouldn't go through too many such experiences.

S: Do you think that the community now is better off because of the flood?

H: Yes, materially. We have better homes in some ways and in other ways not. Some people have nicer homes than they had before with a result of paying higher property taxes and this may be a shock for some of them.

S: Where are you in your recovery operations, one and a half years later?

H: Most of it is done. I did have a construction company come in and take care of some of the major damage. The construction company took care of the crack in my concrete wall. The replaced my kitchen cabinets. I had another company take care of my linolium and carpeting. The rest I am doing myself because I think I can do it. So far I have been successful. Certainly the home is liveable now. There are still aspects of the basement that must be finished. The basement was unfinished before the flood came and I was in the act of working on it when the flood came. It's pretty much the way it was before but there are certain things I still have to do.

S: Did you find any problems while going through this process of rebuilding?

H: Minor ones, nothing fundamental which would cause serious trouble. Little things pop up now and then. For example, the most recent thing I found was my fireplace wasn't finished in the basement and I have recently discovered that a funny little piece of pipe down there really is a gas kindler. What it does, you use it to light your firewood and it didn't mean anything to me because I wasn't using a fireplace. Now I want to use it and I found
out that this thing has to be report... because I have to replace it now. This was most recent.

S: Do you still find a lot of mud in your place?

H: No, very little. You would have to go to pretty well hidden recesses to find any mud.

S: That seems to be the common problem that mud seemed to have gotten everywhere.

H: That was the problem. It really got anywhere it possibly could. I didn't have this trouble but some people found that it even got into their fruit preserve jars.

S: Is there anything else you would like to mention before we conclude this interview?

H: Yes, one thing I forgot to mention earlier in the interview was I did receive help from the Housing and Urban Development. Their object was to try to get me located as quickly as possible although they were swamped and it took them seven weeks to get the house into efficient shape in order that I could move back into it. According to what they said, I qualified for the mini-repair program which means that they did some minor repairs on the house and sort of incomplete job, they gave me some furnishings for me to get back into the house so I could function. Once they got started on it, they were quite conscientious and gave me a reasonably fair job. They gave me a few things and some of the furniture and fixtures that they loaned me I did eventually purchase from them at a nominal sum.

S: They had furniture and fixtures that you could take on a reantal or borrowing basis?

H: Yes, somethings they gave to us like dishes and mops, utensils and bed clothes. These were given gratis. They had a kit or package that everybody got. Some of these things we didn't need because we didn't lose them, but we received them anyway because everybody got one. There were heavier things like a couch or chair, stove, refrigerator, things of this nature we could borrow
for a period of time. At the end, when the time was up, we had to put them back. We had the option of keeping some of them, or all of them or turn them back. What we wanted to keep we could buy. The prices were reasonable.

S: How were they to deal with? Were they fair to you?

H: They seemed to be fair enough. They were doing their job. I had no real problems with the HUD people. They also replaced my hot water heater.

S: On a rental basis?

H: No, that was permanent. Let me mention something about the company that did some construction on my home. I had employed them to take care of the damaged crack in my basement wall plus replacing my kitchen cabinets and three or four other minor things. This company, the Parkinson Construction Company, under Devere Parkinson, shortly before they finished up the work, went bankrupt. They had finished up the thing that I was most concerned about, the concrete foundation. I could see that they had done a good job with this, they had some conscientious workers, and their work, as far as I could see, was superior and they did a good job of replacing the kitchen cabinets. However, they did not put in the handles in the cabinets nor did they put back the formica backing around the kitchen bench work. They were a long time doing it so I went up to the company and asked them what was going on and I found that the story they gave me was that their contractor had absconded with the funds to Mexico. The owner was running after him. I estimated that to finish off the work, the border in the kitchen and the handles on the kitchen cabinets and materials plus labor would have cost about $200 I suspect, according to my figures. I finished it off myself and I'm not too angry that I did it myself because I got it exactly what I wanted it in there. I got the handles I wanted and the border I wanted. I did then employ the services of a local attorney in town, Roger Hoopes, to sue
them. When he declared bankruptcy he put me down as one of his creditors. I was advised that I should see if there were any leans on my property. I went down to the county court house and the clerk specified that there were no leans at all, that I was clear. It was a minor thing that they had not completed. Had I paid them off before the job was done, which perhaps I should not have done, I could have made quite a bit of money on the thing if I had kept it and I still could have under the circumstances. I don't know. But it is not a serious thing. The material that I needed to fix the whole thing up cost me about $80-90 and labor itself would have been $100 which I did myself. It was kind of fun doing it so I didn't mind too much. When you dealt with thousands of dollars, a couple hundred dollars is insignificant relatively speaking. Roger took over for me and he actually had some other cases pertinent to this bankruptcy. Several other people who lost a lot more than I did, in the amount of thousands. He took me on the rider, one more person, because the cases were relevant to my situation so he said he would do it for a nominal sum, which he has done.

S: Do you think you will ever get anything back?

H: It's hard to say. Sometimes Roger is optimistic and sometimes he's not. It's interesting, some of the locals down here are our $10,00-15,000, some of the companies he dealt with here. They claim that he is not really bankrupt. He has a lot of property in his wife's name. They are trying to go after that.

S: Thank you very much, Mr. Hubscher.

Sequel: Parkinson Construction Company was considered totally bankrupt. I received no money from them.