

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

John Bonner

Interviewed by

Richard Stallings

June 23, 1977

Project made possible by funds from the

W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Idaho State Legislature through the
Idaho State Historical Society and
National Endowment for the Humanities

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John L. Bunker
Interviewee's Signature

6-23-77
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: John Bonner

INTERVIEWER: Richard Stallings

DATE: June 23; 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

S: John, please spell your name.

B: John Bonner.

S: Where were you born?

B: Ely, Nevada.

S: How long have you lived here in Rexburg?

B: About eight years.

S: John, do you have a family?

B: Yes, I'm married and have two children.

S: How many were living in your home at the time of the flood?

B: The family was in Nevada, all of us on vacation, on the day the flood came.

S: What was your address at the time of the flood?

B: 355 Cul de Sac, Rexburg.

S: Is that your present address?

B: Yes.

S: John, what do you do for a living?

B: I'm a teacher at Ricks College.

S: Do you own your own home?

B: Yes, we're buying it.

S: Are you involved in any other business or farming operations?

B: No.

S: When they considered building the dam, were you involved in the controversy?

- B: Not really. I didn't hear about it until the dam was well under way and I was aware of the pro and cons and I suppose my position was basically neutral.
- S: You had no feeling one way or the other?
- B: Not really.
- S: Were you aware of the arguments on both sides?
- B: I didn't really become aware of the arguments very much until after the dam collapsed and then retrospects came out.
- S: Did you have any feelings, you or any of your family about the disaster or premonitions?
- B: My wife felt uneasy when we left the home, insecure.
- S: You left how long before the flood?
- B: We had been gone about two weeks when the flood came, I think.
- S: Exactly where were you and your family when the dam broke?
- B: We were in Ely, Nevada.
- S: Do you remember what you were doing at the time of the flood?
- B: Yes, we were sitting, I was sitting in the living room, my wife was in the kitchen and then a friend of my mother's called and said that she had heard on a Salt Lake television station that the Teton Dam had broken and that Rexburg and some other towns were flooded. So we were able to make three calls to Rexburg before the water actually came.
- S: Who did you call?
- B: We called our neighbors, or attempted to. No one answered because our neighbors had been evacuated. We called Jim Gordon, who lives on the hill, his wife gave us some information. We called the National, or the Army Reserve headquarters. He told us that three to four feet of water was expected in our neighborhood, which was accurate, I think we got about

three and a half feet. I believe that we also called the police. The police dispatcher was a little frantic because the water was expected any time as we talked.

S: Then what did you do, John?

B: Well, then we watched every television and radio news broadcast the next two or three days, at least, particularly, my wife and her father. They even stayed up, I think, all night and nearly all night one night. I felt that what had happened had happened and I was concerned and interested, but I think I gave up on TV about ten or eleven that night. That first night.

S: When did you return to Rexburg?

B: We returned on the Tuesday following the flood, about three days later.

S: What were you expecting as you drove home?

B: I don't know. I was uneasy and apprehensive. I was even a little excited. It had been such a topic in the news. I just had kind of a curiosity and I knew it would be bad because I had seen a picture of the drivein that was collapsed near our home. So I knew there would be a great deal of damage. I think the damage surpassed even what we were expecting of the neighborhood, with homes tilted and grain bins in yards. The feeling of walking in our own home and seeing the actual damage in our home. I think it's a little easier to be philisophical about damage to other people's property. When you saw the mud on your own carpet, that was a shocking, emotional experience.

S: Did you give much thoughts about what you would do as you were driving back to Rexburg?

B: Well, not really. I felt we should clean up the home and make the best of it. My wife was almost inclined to let the home revert to the bank, or whatever we needed to do because she had a good idea of the amount of damage and the amount of clean up and so on that would be involved.

- S: Do you think she anticipated better than you did?
- B: I think so. I think she understood, pictured, things more clearly.
- S: Did you have any idea of being reimbursed by the government or by some other agency?
- B: Well, the people in Ely felt that we should be, and would be reimbursed. I didn't really know what idea. I didn't realize what serious trouble we'd been in, if we hadn't been reimbursed.
- S: Did you have any trouble getting into the area?
- B: Nor really, we were stopped once or twice, but having Madison County license plates and a valid driver's license we were able to go through the road blocks without difficulty.
- S: Did you have any trouble driving into your neighborhood?
- B: No, the street was cleared, there was a certain amount of debris in the street as I recall, but it was passable. We could drive right in.
- S: By Tuesday the water had pretty well subsided then, I guess?
- B: Yes, the water had subsided. There some, still some dead animals on the streets and some very obvious evidences of the flood, of course, but the water was gone.
- S: What did you think about as you drove into Rexburg Tuesday afternoon?
- B: Well, at first my feeling was excitement. I was very curious because of all the news stories. As we came to our own neighborhood, it reminded me of a war zone. The fact that homes were off their foundation, it happened to be a gray overcast afternoon, as I remember. A very gloomy setting. I remember one neighbor was sitting where the foundation was, his home had washed over next door. He smiled and waved and some other neighbors greeted us, but it was a nightmare, in fact. Really an unreal situation.
- S: Do you remember your attitude at that point as you drove into your neighborhood?

- B: It was discouraging. I remember my wife wept when she saw our home. I was overwhelmed. Numbed, didn't really feel too much of anything. I just couldn't believe it, maybe.
- S: Did you have your children with you at this time?
- B: No. We left our children with my wife's parents in Nevada, which was a blessing. I'm glad, we missed them, but I'm glad they weren't here to see.
- S: What were their feelings, as you were in the process of coming back to Rexburg? Did they understand?
- B: Well, Sherrie tried to prepare them, my wife prepared them that our home would be very different, that their toys and possessions would be gone. Their house would be different. Our neighborhood would be, it was hard. I think they were prepared for the shock as well as could be.
- S: So you pulled into your yard, I suppose there was still some water and some debris on the lawn and around the yard. Would you describe your home at this point?
- B: We had about an inch of mud on the carpet, as I remember, one lamp table had been knocked over and some books were lying on the carpet. The doors were shut and locked, which surprised us. Except for the mud itself, the house was quite orderly. As I said, the one light table had been tipped over and spilled some things. We just walked through and noticed that the bedspread had dipped down into the mud. The water had come up on the bedspread and had got on the curtains and drapes, anything that was low, the water had gotten onto.
- S: Did you have a basement?
- B: Yes. The basement was flooded, **completely** filled with water. The basement was the worst part of the home. I hardly dared look down the stairs for two or three days. I heard rumors of snakes and so I was a little afraid to

go down. The insulation in the ceiling in the basement was hanging down; and it gave it a very eerie look down there. We had food storage there. The first thing you would see when you looked down the basement stairwell was the hundred pound sack of powdered milk. I wondered how on earth I'd ever get it out because it had probably taken on some water.

S: Was your basement finished?

B: It was half-finished. Half of it was finished, the contents were strewn all over, of course.

S: What was the damage you suffered in the flood?

B: Okay. I think most of the furnishings and other items in the home were destroyed. We had a considerable amount of food storage in the basement, which, of course, was all ruined. We had home-canned fruit as part of the storage which was, of course, ruined. Upstairs, the carpeting was ruined. Some of the furniture was damaged, such things as the older couch we ended up throwing away. We seemed to throw more and more away as time went on. We felt we could save refrigerator and appliances. We washed things and cleaned them. We eventually ended up throwing away nearly everything, furniture, food, and just about everything in the house really.

S: This was on both floors?

B: On both floors.

S: What was the more cherished item you lost?

B: The picture albums, wedding albums, baby albums, missionary albums. Souvenir type books that were not replaceable. I think are the things we missed the most and felt the worst about losing. I did save one ten-year hand written diary. The books were wedged in the bookcase so tight that I had to break the bookcase to get them out. They had expanded and swollen with water and we were able to save the one diary. That was nearly the only book we saved.

- S: What did you think about at this point?
- B: I was awfully discouraged thinking how I'd ever clean this up when a friend appeared on the doorstep the next morning, Randall Miller, with a bucket and his coveralls. He and I went to work that Wednesday, following our return. Not long after that, volunteers started coming and started cleaning up the basement. We lifted the buckets of mud and water out the basement window and removed the window and casing, even the window well to do it. At that point I started to take a certain amount of courage, people started to help. It looked like we would get through with cleaning up, maybe fix it some day.
- S: How long were you out of your home?
- B: We were out for about six months. We moved back in the latter part of October.
- S: So where did you stay during this...?
- B: We stayed in Charles Grant's basement. He has an apartment, which he formerly rented to students and he and his wife were good enough to move upstairs so that we could use the apartment, which was very comfortable.
- S: You stayed there during that cleanup operations?
- B: Yes, during the cleanup and also the repair and the remodeling.
- S: Now, you mentioned that you had some local help. Did you receive any other help in cleaning up your property?
- B: Let's see. Now, after the basic cleanup was completed and this same Randall Miller helped with landscaping and leveling the outside area, in order that we could put sod and sod was delivered to us by the American Falls Sod Company and the elders quorum of the branch I served in, the 24th branch, came and helped us lay the sod one morning.
- S: Did any other volunteers, from these outside areas, come in to help you?

B: Yes, we had many volunteers from outside. I'd say during the peak of the clean up, for about two weeks that we probably had five or ten people working at our home most days. They would stay maybe a half day or even all day depending on the circumstances, but we had the basement completely cleaned out. Women washed bottles for us, we emptied the contents of the fruit jars and they rinsed out the bottles and we saved them. They had a cheerful attitude that helped as they were compassionate, but they couldn't take the flood quite as seriously as we could. They could smile. I think many local people lost their humor and smile for a little while.

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

B: Well, just the whole thing was inspirational to see the people come and not be afraid to get right into the filth because particularly what was in the basement was a mixture of diesel fuel, mud, manure, straw, and just every sort of objectional thing you could imagine was down there. They weren't afraid to wade right in. We had good helpers from Idaho Falls and all over.

S: Do you remember any specific groups?

B: Generally, they were church groups, LDS church groups who had ridden in, usually on school buses. Then they'd be assigned to a ward area and then we'd go to the point where the helpers for a particular ward were dispersed and tell the bishop or whoever was in charge how many helpers we needed that day. Maybe we needed eight or ten people and they'd dispatch that many people with us. Normally they'd bring their own lunch. They'd work all day and leave four or five in the afternoon, drive back home.

S: How many people would you say were involved in helping you?

B: I would guess, 100 or 125 people helped us personally there in our own home. I think at least that many.

S: How did that affect you to see this kind of support?

B: Well, it was very uplifting and I am grateful to this day and often as I look at our lawn, our front lawn, or go down the basement, I'd say, at least weekly and probably oftener than that, I remember these people and the help and I'm always grateful and it's always uplifting to remember. Remember them and what they did.

S: Did you receive any assistance from the Red Cross or any other private organizations?

B: Yes, I remember the Red Cross man coming around one day as we were cleaning up and he asked us if we needed any soap, any mops or brooms, any supplies and he gave us what we needed, which also we appreciated very much. I remember seeing Red Cross food and supplies at the college cafeteria where we ate for a month or so.

S: You did take your meals there at the college for awhile.

B: Yes, we did.

S: Now, did your children return during any of this time?

B: Well, the children stayed for I'd say a month after the flood. My wife came to Rexburg for two weeks soon after the flood and then she went home after that for two weeks.

S: Now, for home, you mean Ely?

B: Back to Ely, yes. So that her parents wouldn't have the full burden of the children. So it was a month later. It was in July when the children and my wife returned to stay, to live in Grant's apartment.

S: What kept you going through this cleanup operation?

B: Well, I think the fact that so many of us were in the same condition. It I was filthy, covered with mud and tired and everybody I saw was in the same shape, I think that was encouraging. There was a certain amount of group spirit carried upon the fact that we all had the same situation.

S: It's pretty hard to feel sorry for yourself when everyone else is in the same boat.

B: Yes.

S: What government agencies did you deal with during this recovery?

B: Well, we went to the Ricks College field house and went through this series of government helpers: legal counsel, housing counsel, through the Housing and Urban Development who paid our rent in Grant's apartment. The Red Cross, of course. Eventually we got with the Bureau of Reclamation on a claim. I think that was later, was later on. We talked with Small Business Administration. Heard a little from the IRS but those were the main ones I remember at first.

S: How would you evaluate their effectiveness?

B: Well, I thought they were good and helpful. Not quite as efficient or whole hearted perhaps as the purely volunteer groups, such as church and Red Cross, which they seemed to just give and ask nothing in return. Ask no questions, in effect. The government a little more in the way of regulation and seemed to expect a certain amount of obligation on our part to receive perhaps. At least that was the feeling or the impression that I got.

S: How about state officials, did you ever have to deal with any on a state level?

B: Not directly. I appreciated some things that Governor Andrus said where he gave a speech at Twin Falls and said that there shouldn't be any recriminations. That those who were against the dam shouldn't say, "I told you so." I appreciated his attitude of just, now let's clean out and do our best. Also he seemed to be interested and concerned. He made trips to the area, he spoke to the people on one occasion, one or more, so I remember his involvement.

S: How about local officials, sheriff, or the county government officials?

- B: The only thing that I remember directly, there was listening to the news, broadcast while we were still in Nevada right after the flood and I think it was the sheriff of Teton County had called, or notified Hill Air Force Base that they would need, they were having a flood and would need identification tags, and medication related to floods and that was the only thing I can remember off hand.
- S: Did you suffer any vandalism or from lawlessness during this time?
- B: No, no I don't recall any theft in our neighborhood. I remember a state policeman coming down the block to check the identification of a back hoe or frontend loader because one of them had been stolen, I don't think any things was taken from us.
- S: Were you aware of any looting or theivery going on?
- B: It seems I heard a few stories about things being taken, but I'm not sure that I directly knew anyone who lost anything.
- S: Do you feel that anyone who was assisted in the recover operation took advantage of you or the government, especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it?
- B: No, none that I know of. No, I understood there were those who were trying to buy out property cheaply and so on, but I didn't have any contact with such persons. I really wasn't aware of any gross violations of that kind.
- S: Without divulging names, are you aware of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?
- B: No really, there may have been differences of opinion on how much this person or that should have asked for, but I'm not aware of anyone who seriously attempted to defraud the government or anyone else.
- S: As you filed your own flood claims, were there points of frustration for you, were there difficulties that you had trouble with?

B: Yes, it was it was an overwhelming job just to face the task of listing your possessions and trying to assign a price to them. There were debates on whether you should claim certain items. I remember, for example, I had a deer rifle, the stock, and old deer rifle and the stock got wet, I claimed it and I still wonder if I should have. It was damaged, but there was always a question of, you know, that the extent of the damage was, and perhaps would it repair or would a replacement be proper.

S: How did the government officials treat you in working out this claim?

B: I felt we were treated fairly. They cut our claim by a small percentage, perhaps two percent and we have a few minor items such as they thought we claimed a little high on a black and white television as I remember, they cut this a little there, but essentially, we got very close to what we asked and I felt that we were fairly treated.

S: Were the personnel kind and considerate in dealing with you?

B: I felt that they were, the verifier that came to our house seemed to be considerate, seemed to be professional.

S: Do you feel the flood was some type of divine punishment or was it a natural disaster, or just a man-made.

B: Well, I don't know that it was a punishment, I feel more in the sense of blessing than of retribution. I feel, for example, the fact that the dam broke during the daylight, during the summer, rather than some other time was a divine blessing, and that the lives were spared and the damage was minimal.

S: How has the disaster affected your life?

B: Well, I think it's affected it and yet perhaps not as drastically as some. I'm still in the same profession, still living in the same home. I remember

the church officials saying that this would be a great turning point for many and that they would actually go into a new life's work and I'm aware of many that have changed to different neighborhoods and perhaps even towns, in some cases. So I think it's taught me some lessons about the relative value of material things and my life is going on about the same as before.

S: How has it affected the community?

B: The community seems improved, and the community seems to have grown in many things, since the stores seemed to have been updated and expanded, made better so the community was generally helped from the flood.

S: What's the long range effect of this disaster?

B: It seems to me that the flood accelerated everything, made time move faster. Older homes and buildings were destroyed, torn down, perhaps they would have lasted for twenty years in the natural course of things and they were destroyed, or caused to be destroyed or to be taken down. Over night it just seemed to speed things up and I think that we were left ahead by ten or twenty years in one year.

S: Would you say that it was a good thing?

B: Well, generally, I think so. There may be some disadvantages, but the area seems to be more cosmopolitan which is in itself kind of a mixed blessing. There are people from many areas, diverse cultures and backgrounds, religious and so on, where as before the community seemed to be more stable and more cohesive, more a typical small town, now it's grown and it's changed, expanded.

S: Do you believe that the dam should be rebuilt?

B: I have reservations about rebuilding the dam. For instance, I feel that it should be an all cement structure and a carefully chosen site and if it were to be rebuilt, and I would probably always be a little bit uneasy if it were rebuilt and yet I'm not vehemently opposed, but I think that they should proceed with great caution and spend enough money to really build a strong structure.

- S: Would you put it in the same place?
- B: Well, there seems to be a lot of criticism of the site, the holes and fissures in the rocks and so on and I suppose if enough experts said build it the same place again, I would say okay, but it looks to me like some other sites should be explored if they did rebuild.
- S: As you look back on the flood, is there anything that stands out as unusual or strange that you remember?
- B: I remember, for instance, that we had a strong wooden fence which was set on steel posts, set in cement and the posts were either ripped out of the ground or bent in half, and yet the hot caps stayed in the garden. I've noticed some of the tulips have come up again and our strawberry patch, rather our raspberries, many of them died but many of them also lived. We even had one blooming rose bush immediately after the flood and since it has died.
- S: John, has there been anything that you discovered missing after a year since the flood?
- B: I can't really think of anything that we forgot to put on the inventory, anything that we recalled since we made our inventory for our claim that was significant at all.
- S: Did you discover anything on your property that had washed in from the flood, anything unusual in that sense?
- B: Well, we had a dead fish on our back yard and we had a check from Teton or Newdale that had washed up onto our driveway. A car floated on the vacant lot next door. Finally, I called and asked for it to be hauled away. Those are the things I remember.
- S: What is the condition of the neighborhood today, pretty well back as it was?
- B: Yes, the neighborhood is very close to being what it was a year ago. A new Boise Cascade home was just set in place which gives the same number of homes

before. As soon as the front part of the newer homes are landscaped, I think the street will look much as it did the day before the flood.

S: So life will go on as...?

B: I think life will be much the same. We've lost one neighbor who has moved away. Others will be moving, but I'm not sure that they are directly flood related ones. One was, but I don't know of the other cases. I think our neighborhood will be similar to what it was before the flood.

S: Is there any bitterness in your life or your wife's life at this point?

B: Not really. I think there is more to be thankful for than to be bitter about. The days of actually cleaning up the mud and so on are soon forgotten; soon they seemed a little unreal and living in the dorms away from home, that was a little unpleasant, but we are thankful for a place to stay. But those kinds of things are soon forgotten and you have to be thankful for what you have.

S: Well thank you. I appreciate your comments and time. This tape will be placed in the libraries at Ricks College, Utah State University as well as the Idaho State Archives for use by future researchers.