TETON DAM DISASTER

Rodney Shirley
Interviewed by
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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information contained in the interview with Rodney James Shirley, I, Fremont Fullmer, knowingly and voluntarily permit the Milton R. Merrill Library at Utah State University, the David O. McKay Library at Ricks College, and the Idaho State Historical Society at Boise, Idaho, the full rights and use of this information.

[Signature]
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[Date]
3/8/78

Date
You have been interviewed in connection with a joint oral history program of the History Department, Utah State University, Ricks College, and the Idaho State Historical Society. The purpose of this oral history program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview has been made by the interviewer. A verbatim typescript of the tape will be made and a final typed and edited transcript, together with the tape will be made and a final will then be filed in the Milton R. Merrill Library Special Collections, David O. McKay Library at Ricks College, and the Idaho State Historical Society in Boise. This material will be made available according to each of the depositories' policies for research by scholars and by others for scholarly purposes. When the final transcript is completed, a personal copy will be sent to you.

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, Rodney James Shirley, do hereby assign full
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and all rights of this material to the Merrill Library at Utah State University, to the Library at Ricks College, and to the Idaho State Historical Society at Boise, Idaho, for scholarly purposes according to each of the institutions governing policies.

[Signature]
Interviewee's Signature

3/1/77
Date
F: What is your name?
S: Rodney Shirley.
F: Spell it please.
S: Rodney Shirley.
F: How old are you?
S: Sixty-two.
F: Do you have a family?
S: One son and my wife.
F: Okay, how many were living at the home at the time of the flood?
S: The three of us.
F: What was your address at the time of the flood?
S: Rexburg, Idaho, Route 2.
F: What is your address now?
S: The same.
F: What do you do for a living?
S: At the time of the flood I worked at the Youth Training Center in St. Anthony and now since then, I've retired.
F: How long have you lived in this area?
S: Life time.
F: You own your own home, farm, or business before the flood?
S: Yes.
F: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?
S: I supported it wholeheartedly.

F: And did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?

S: No, none at all.

F: Where were you and your family when the Teton Dam broke?

S: My wife worked where I do, and, of course, it was her day off so she was home doing routine work and I was up there. I'd just got dinner ready for the kids at the school and the word come to me that the dam had broken. Of course, at the time I thought he was kidding and didn't believe him.

F: Okay. What was your first reaction when you heard the dam had failed? Did you try to save any of your household property?

S: Well, I'd been up to the dam the week before that and we'd gone up. I'd looked forward to this thing for so long that I had to go up there to pick a good fishing spot on the rocky points before the thing filled up. And I saw the body of water there and was quite startled that it had backed up and it was a bigger lake than it was. So when they started announcing the dam had broken and that it would spread over this valley, four feet of water, why it was complete disbelief to me. No way possible could I see that it would spread over that big of an area with as little water as there was there. So my reaction was that, oh, they'd magnified the thing and it's couldn't possibly be that bad.

F: Okay, did you see the flood coming?

S: No, I didn't see it because we went to town.

F: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed, what preparations to save your property or business did you undertake?

S: Well, we were just ready to finish the last room in the house and we had a little, or some plywood and sheet rock that we thought well, let's put this up on the sawhorse so it doesn't get wet. They were two feet off the ground and after the flood had gone by why we had nine feet of water.
F: In vacating the area where you lived, tell what happened to you and your family.
S: My wife was quite, well she was more serious and probably a little smarter than I was because she wanted to put things up and take a lot of things with us but I, like I say, I'd seen the thing and couldn't see where we could have any water and I took the easy way and disregarded the advice of other people and we just went out with about what we had on minor things.
F: Okay, did you have any unusual or miraculous experience connected with the flood?
S: No, not really.
F: Did you see any animals trying to escape the flood waters?
S: Just one in downtown Rexburg that we watched from up at the college where we were and she got washed down into a bunch of trees and that's the last we saw of her.
F: Where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood?
S: In the dorms up at the college.
F: Did you continue to stay there during the cleanup?
S: Yes.
F: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property? How did you get there and what was your first reaction when you viewed the destruction of your property?
S: Well, it was the next day. We saw the flood from up on the hill and we were up on the tall buildings there, the dorm at the college. And really you couldn't see much there. The first thing we saw it and really noticed the water was here, was homes, large objects floating and it looked like to us a big lake with house-boats on it all going the same direction. And that was actually the thing that it looked like.
F: Okay, how soon after the flood were you able to return to your property? How did you get there and what was your reaction when you viewed the destruction of your property?
All right. At this point, I ought to insert that I feel, and I am very sure that it's possible, and when there's so many things going on that people can be left out. But I think here's a good place to make it known, and I think that it should get into the historical records of this flood, that the first people actually into the flood, was the helping hands, CB club. Now, my son is a member of this and they got the word in Shelley that the flood was breaking and by one o'clock, they had the trucks loaded and ready to come to Rexburg with supplies. They were turned back soon after 1:30 down at Thornton, so with his knowledge of the country, he went up to Heise, made it over the dry farms and by 3:30 that afternoon, they were right on the corner of the Manwaring Center and the dorms on the east there, on that corner, and I think most everyone will verify the fact that they had sandwiches, cookies, punch, fresh water, and also clothing for people that need them. They were breaking out boxes of clothing and shoes like that long before the early evening hours even come. And they have never yet been mentioned in an appreciation of any kind.

F: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property?

S: Okay, the next day will all the helicopters up there and Al being a member like I say of this CB club, he went up and contacted one of the reporters there that were taking newspapermen from Salt Lake out over the area and he said, "Well," he said, "I've got two of these reporters and a half hour after I get back with them. "Why then," he says, "then I'll be able to take you out." So it was about 3:00 in the afternoon that Nile, Kent and I came out to the house. He brought us out and set us down on the church house lot. And, you first instinct when you see bare wires on the ground is, be careful you'll be electrocuted. We shied away for a moment and then, one quick look and you could see there was no electricity in the whole area. And then, ov source, we were able to wade over to the house. There was water still at that time, waist deep coming through the field here.
SHIRLEY

F: Okay, what was the damage you suffered as a result of the flood? And what was the most cherished item that you lost?

S: Well, everything was gone actually, the house was gone. The fact that we're able to fly Western Airlines twice a year anywhere they fly, we'd been to Aculpulco, to Alaska, and Hawaii and all parts, and at least those. In doing that we got a lot of cherished pictures. We had in Mexico City and my missionary pictures, and pictures of climbing the Tetons, and all the things we had ever done together. Why I think if we had to choose, why, our pictures would be the cherished one. You can replace the furniture and like that, but not those.

F: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the flood water roll through the area?

S: One quick sentence---complete disbelief.

F: How did you go about cleaning up your property?

S: Oh, we come out that day and my wife was able to come out the next day. We were able to get out there in the four-wheel drive and this would be the second day. So we went through the closets. Most of the furniture was gone but there were clothes that looked like they could be washed out. So we loaded up wheelbarrows of clothes and take them up through the ditch and between Kent and Nile and Patty and I we swished them out in the ditch and took them up to Huskinson's and the good soul up there furnished us a washer and we were able to salvage quite a few of the clothes that we had.

F: What were some of the problems with which you were confronted? Problems that gave you the most frustrations.

S: Oh, time consuming things, I guess, that due to the fact, naturally, that there was so many people in the same boat, and no clean water and electricity that, it was trying to get things cleaned up with no water.

F: Did you receive any help in cleaning up your property?
S: To start with, it was so hopeless, and it looked like there was so few things to save that we just kind of disregarded it. Then as time went on and other people got places dug out and there were people over at the bishop's storehouse over there waiting for work, why then we brought it out here and cleaned the whole house, shoveled it out, hoping that we could maybe find our precious books and some of our pictures and genealogy and stuff like that.

F: Okay, did you personally suffer any vandalism or other form of lawlessness?

S: Nope, none at all.

F: What did the government, what kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

S: Oh, Red Cross, we got Ted Cross help what we could. And just generally went along with the advice of the church and the Bureau of Reclamation and natural proceedings.

F: Did you receive any assistance from the LDS Church or orhter church groups immediately after the flood?

S: Definitely, the church fed us and clothed us, they bedded us. Without them, why, it would have been mighty bleak, I'd say.

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

S: Like I say, the helping hand club was first on the job, they were ahead of Red Cross. They were there as quick as the church except the fact that the church is here established. To move in, they were the first. And definitely, we accepted Red Cross help. They had rooms and all that sort of thing and we had paid to Red Cross so we figured it was getting back just a little of your contribution.

F: Okay, did you have any dealings with the county or state authorities and law enforcement officers during the flood?

S: Just general coming and going. Found them to be very cooperative and doing really a good job.
F: Okay, do you feel that any who assisted in recovery operations, took advantage of you or the government especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it? Please do not divulge any names.

S: No, I don't think any took advantage of us.

F: Okay, without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

S: No, I really don't.

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

S: It wasn't divine punishment. It was a man-made disaster, yes, but I think probably there was a purpose behind it. To prepare us for something that could maybe be a lot worse. And now we'll relate this. The dams like that we're building nowadays, my son-in-law is a core driller for dams, that's his job. He was drilling one in Oregon and Montana; he drilled for the Ririe Dam. My comment to him was when we called him that night of the flood, I says, "Diane, tell old Doug to drill those holes deep and to fill them full of concrete." She says, "Dad, we've already talked that over. I know old Doug drills those holes deep and he pores concrete in them until they say, 'Come on Hardrath, you've poured enough concrete in that thing, let's go on to the next one. Forget it.'" So in these big dams, now we're just a small community here, but in these larger dams where they's ten thousand or fifty thousand people below those dams, I think they're going to be more cautious in building them now. And this small disaster may be a forewarning to what can happen. And I think this will be very famous under these larger real catastrophes.

F: Okay, do you feel the dam should be rebuilt and if so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?
S: I think it should be rebuilt. It really do, but I'm not experienced in that really to know whether to say the same place. For that you'll have to go to someone a little more skilled that I am.

F: How has the Teton Disaster changed your life?

S: It's changed it definitely. Boy, you've got decisions everyday that are binding. And you can get into some discussions with your wife, with your families, with your contractor, because the things you're doing today are costly, they have a lot of bearing on your future happiness in your living and the other it it's three or four months of frustration and confusion.

F: If you have any special story or any kind of experiences that you think should be on the tape, now is your chance to relate it. Either one of you.

S: Oh, there's just one little incident that's insignificant yet it makes you wonder, when you get to thinking. We got a dog out here, just a mangey little mutt that's a real, only companion that Todd has got. And his first night over at the dorm that night and he started crying and saying that old Wigs would be dead, Wiggles we call him. He's a dog that's back is no higher than ten inches, well, a foot off the ground. Well, the first thing we saw when we come in the house, was dog tracks in the mud. And I said to Nile and Kent, I says, "Hey, that look's like old Wiggles' tracks." But how could he survive when there was nine feet of water at this house and in the bathroom and bedroom, it splashed on the ceiling. Actually it was a six inch water line in here. So we kind of dismissed the idea and we worked and sloshed around in the place all day and on our way, walking back to Rexburg that night we got over to Layle Bagley's house and Layle and Glade Wasden and I think Perry Robinson were climbing out of Layle's house and Perry and Glade come out first and then Layle came out of that little three cornered hole in the peak of his house there and he had Wiggles in his arm. I said, "Where in the world did you get that mutt?" He said, "Well, I was
coming by your place and he come out in the road there just about as happy as a lost child could be." And he said, "When we saw him, we thought, well, he belongs to someone so if we take him over to the dorms shy they'll find him or you'll find someone." So he said, "We were just heading into town with him." And I said, "Well, I can't believe it. Where did he come from? Where did he make that, survive that flood? And what happened? Why is he here? The cow is ten times bigger and everything else, while they're gone, no more to return."

F: Okay, you got anything?

Mrs. S: We can just be thankful it didn't happen at night.

F: Okay, well, we'll have supper then.