

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Lawrence Coates

Interviewed by

Richard Stallings

June 29, 1977

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY & RICKS COLLEGE

HISTORY DEPARTMENTS

COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information contained in the interview with LAWRENCE COATES, I, RICHARD H. STALLINS (name, please print) (interviewer, print) 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.

Richard H. Stallins  
Interviewer's Signature

6-29-77

Date

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INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

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 transcripts, 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 be scholars and by others for scholarly purposes. When the final transcript is completed, a personal copy will be sent to you.

\* \* \* \* \*

In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, LAWRENCE G. COATES, do hereby assign full  
(please print full name)

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.

Lawrence Coates  
Interviewee's Signature

6-29-77

Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Lawrence Coates

INTERVIEWER: Richard Stallings

DATE: June 29, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

- S: Would you please spell your name?
- C: Lawrence Coates.
- S: Where were you born?
- C: Nampa, Idaho.
- S: How long have you lived here in Rexburg?
- C: Seven years. We lived there before that from 1956-1958.
- S: How old are you?
- C: Forty-six.
- S: Do you have a family?
- C: Yes.
- S: How large of a family do you have?
- C: Six children and a wife.
- S: How many were living at your home at the time of the flood?
- C: Five children.
- S: What is your address?
- C: Route 2, Box 16, Rexburg.
- S: Would you describe the location of your home?
- C: Its situated two miles north of the livestock auction on the Salem Highway, two mile intersection.
- S: What do you do for a living?
- C: I teach at the college.

- S: Do you own your own home?
- C: Yes, we are buying it.
- S: Are you involved in farming or any other type of business around the area?
- C: We raise a few cows, pigs, chickens and occasionally some bees.
- S: How much acreage did you have then with your home included?
- C: Six acres.
- S: When they began discussing the construction of the dam there was a certain amount controversy over it. Were you aware of the controversy?
- C: Yes.
- S: Were you involved in it at all?
- C: No.
- S: Did you have any opinion on the construction of the dam?
- C: No, it didn't effect my judgment one way or the other.
- S: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?
- C: No.
- S: Where were you and your family when the dam broke?
- C: Home.
- S: Do you remember what you were doing that day?
- C: Yes, Blair and I had just finished taking care of the bees. We put a super on the beehive and Blair had finished planting about a quarter of an acre of corn that we had started the day before. Colleen was cleaning in the house and Elaine was sleeping. She had worked all night at J.B.'s. That was basically the situation.
- S: Do you remember how you were informed that the dam had broken?
- C: Yes, a patrolman stopped in the yard and came into the house and told Colleen that the dam had burst and that we had very little time to get up to high ground.

- S: What was your first reaction?
- C: I could hardly believe it. It didn't seem real. We took his advice and left immediately.
- S: Did you try to save any household or personal belongings?
- C: Not a thing. We didn't know what to expect. Elaine was not even dressed because she was still asleep. She got dressed and then we got in the automobiles. I took the pickup with two kids and Colleen took the rest of the kids in the car and we decided to meet at my office.
- S: Did you see the flood coming?
- C: Yes, we saw it from the windows of the college.
- S: How would you describe it?
- C: It looked like a muddy river, with everything from houses to animals in it. It was like muddy soup.
- S: As you were leaving the area, did you anticipate the damage that eventually did happen?
- C: No.
- S: What went through your mind, do you recall?
- C: I really didn't know what to expect. We met at my office and I had to prepare for a youth conference that was suppose to be given the next day. I spent sometime there trying to get something together in case the youth conference would still occur. I didn't have any idea what was happening.
- S: You didn't anticipate the type of damage that happened?
- C: No, I thought maybe two or three feet of water through the yard.
- S: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?
- C: Not that I know of. I guess it was miraculous that we were notified and we were all together and left together. There was no real anxiety or loss of life as far as our family was concerned. We had no fears.

- S: You spent the rest of the afternoon on the college campus?
- C: Yes.
- S: Did you notice anything unusual about the attitude or atmosphere that prevailed among the people?
- C: They were a little stunned and a little bewildered, confused, but no bizarre panic or that sort of behavior. I didn't see it.
- S: Did you witness anything unusual in the flood? Anything that struck you and stayed with you?
- C: No, some experiences that other people have had surprised me. Les Shirley and his wife were not even warned about it and he was in the bathtub taking a bath when the flood hit. Verl Bird, a good friend of mine, stayed on his slippery slide and watched the whole affair. Lynn Williams, a neighbor, watched the whole affair from the roof of his house. Those are well-known stories.
- S: Where did you and your family stay the first few days after the flood?
- C: We stayed with Ralph McBride and family for three weeks after the flood. Then we moved into an apartment building owned by Dem Birch. HUD paid the rent. We stayed there until August 15, when the trailer was prepared for us to move into. We moved into the trailer about August 15th.
- S: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property?
- C: I was out there the next day even though the police were patrolling the entering into the region. We drove all the way up to Felt, Ashton, St. Anthony and over to the north end of Salem and walked from the other side of the north port of the Teton River across on a boat. We walked through the area that Sunday afternoon.
- S: What did you see?

- C: Devastation everywhere. The river was washed out, the roads were washed out, telephone lines were down and houses were washed away or severely damaged. It was like walking in soup. We walked up to the house. I walked in about a foot and a half of nothing but silt, muck and mud. We walked through the house and it smelled like a barnyard.
- S: Do you remember what you were thinking about?
- C: Yes, I was thinking how things could be recovered, restored. My first impression was a cleaning job would take care of things. After we had cleaned and examined the house carefully we could see that it was damaged beyond repair.
- S: Your home was completely destroyed?
- C: Yes, it stood but the water went under the two foundations and settled the center of the house as much as six inches. In two rooms the floors in each had collapsed. The foundation cracked in several places. The water was as deep as six feet in two rooms. It ripped the sheet rock off the walls in some of the rooms. It was a devastating mess.
- S: How about your other buildings? Were they in the same state?
- C: It washed the barn, two sheds, loading shoot, and the corral completely away.
- S: Did you have any livestock there at the time?
- C: Two heifers and a hive of bees. They were all gone. Never found a trace of any one of them. The only shed that stood was the shop and garage that we have out there. They stayed probably because I had recently poured a floor in it between the foundation. One wall pushed out and a bunch of crap went in, but it stood.
- S: What was the most cherished item that you and your wife lost?



- C: I would say all our family pictures, Bibles, heirlooms and things of that nature cannot be remade or replaced.
- S: Did you have any unusual experiences in recovering?
- C: I found a lot of things going through the muck. We found all of our check stubs. We left the checkbook on the dresser when we left. When I cleaned up, I stuck my whole hand in the mud and by accident found it. We have an accounting of all the checks that we had written.
- S: What did you think about as you watched the waters roll through as you walked out through this area?
- C: It was unreal; it seemed like a dream. It seemed like things like this happened elsewhere; they don't happen in Rexburg.
- S: How did you go about cleaning up the property?
- C: The Monday after the flood, we tried to drive out here. What a terrible hassle from the state police. They gave us nothing but the run around. The patrolman said, "You have to have a permit from the Corps of Engineers and then you can enter." I went back to the disaster headquarters and got one, but the police would not accept it. I went back and got somebody else to sign it, one of the county commissioners. Finally, they let me go through. The strange thing about it was at the same time my relatives from Orem, Utah, came up on a motorcycle. He had picked up his dad in Idaho Falls and they drove out to see the devastation. Nobody stopped them and nobody asked them any questions. That was the thing that was so irritating.
- S: Did you receive any help in cleaning up your property?
- C: Yes, the volunteers helped clean. The college sent a truck with a loader to load up the debris that came from out of the house. We got rid of contaminated food and garbage that was going to spread diseases. Those are the two groups of people that gave help to us. The McBride children

came everyday for the first week with me and worked right along beside me.

S: Did you have any questions how you would ever get it cleaned up?

C: Yes, it seemed like a never-ending process. In fact, its still not completely cleaned up. There are things scattered throughout the field that haven't been picked up yet. We'll build a house first.

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

C: It was inspiring to think that people would travel hundreds of miles to spend their time and money to come help. It was encouraging to see how other people in the ward responded to the difficulty. It was really comforting to know that so few people were lost in the tragedy. Those are the things that impressed me.

S: Did you suffer any vandalism or looting?

C: Yes, I did. I can't prove this, but I think it came from the contractor people who came in and put the HUD trailers up. I lost quite a few tools out of my shop out there. In fact, I had been working with them on one of the bicycles trying to get it fixed, and I came back the next day and the tools were gone. There was an electric clock taken out of the house also and some other things that were hanging above the waterline. We couldn't stand guard and protect it there all the time.

S: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

C: I spent one day going through all the lines. We got some Red Cross aid which isn't the government, but it certainly helped. HUD, with their care package, because the rent was paid by them. When we finally moved into the trailer, we couldn't get the pump to work. They finally put in a new pump and they installed a septic tank for the trailer.

- S: Did you receive any assistance from the Latter-Day Saint Church?
- C: Yes, the church provided meals for us while we were out here working. They gave us food and clothing during that time period.
- S: Did you have any trouble accepting it?
- C: Yes, it bothered me to think that we would have to stand in line. I think it is easier to give than receive.
- S: You mentioned that you received some assistance from the Red Cross. Would you care to describe that?
- C: They gave us money to buy clothing, mattresses for the baby, and some sheets for the crib. None of us knew where our clothes were. All of our clothes were lost or damaged. All we had was the clothes that we had on the day we left home.
- S: Do you think the Red Cross's efforts were beneficial?
- C: Yes, I have nothing but praise for them. The Red Cross really helped in this particular case. I have heard a lot of critical comments in my life about the Red Cross and about how they didn't do much. I don't believe that. In this case they were very helpful. There were other volunteer groups. The Mennonites, didn't help me particularly, but I know they helped other people out here. They came and had dinner with us over at the bishop's storehouse on a number of occasions. There was another group. I have forgotten their name, but it was a church group that traveled to give some help.
- S: You mentioned that you dealt with HUD. Did you have to deal with any other federal agencies?
- C: They had the fieldhouse completely arranged so you could go through and talk to the Internal Revenue Service, HUD, and the BOR. We filed our claim with an agency that loaned the money to the Small Business Loan Agency.

We filed a claim with them and they came out and made an investigation on our report. We took a loan, but we paid it off as soon as the claim was partially paid.

S: How would you evaluate these various federal agencies with whom you dealt?

C: Most of them, I felt, were very concerned and helpful but there was a lot of red tape to go through to get everything done. I guess it was necessary.

S: You felt they dealt fairly with you?

C: Yes, we haven't finished settling with the BOR. I have heard a lot of real harsh stories about how people have dealt with the BOR before we filed our claim. I thought it was absolutely necessary that I document everything. I spent a great amount of time and effort trying to list everything that we had which I was unable to do but made a good effort at it. We priced everything that we had in terms of the quality of the materials. It was difficult to document everything. The part of the claim that had already been paid we had to problems with it. There was land damage and that part of the claim hasn't been settled. I'll have to file a separate claim on the septic tank and for the well. The well has pumped sand all summer. Some days its extremely bad and almost every week we have to take the hose off the washer and clean out the filters to keep the sand out.

S: Will you put down for a new well or can it be fixed?

C: We will have to put down for a new well. It's a thirty foot sand point and it will be less expensive and more practical to drill a new well. One Sunday morning we got up and the water looked like soup because there was so much debris. The sand had plugged the hook valve and we have had that constantly. We had all kinds of debris and sand. Colleen took a shower

that morning and she couldn't imagine why it stung so much until she looked in the bottom of the tub. The bottom was completely covered with sand.

S: Did you have to deal with any state officials?

C: No, not to my recollection.

S: National Guardsmen and Highway Patrolmen?

C: Yes, only with those people.

S: Were they effective in their jobs?

C: I wasn't impressed with the first batch of highway patrolmen that we had. Some of them were nasty and hard to get along with. If I had that kind of people to be with, the only difference between them and the crooks, the crooks are behind bars and they are not. Particularly one person, I don't know his name but he was as nasty as he could be.

S: Was he on one of the roadblocks that you tried to get through?

C: Yes, he was. He didn't stay here very long.

S: How about local officials? Civil Defense?

C: I thought they were helpful. The county was particularly helpful in giving advice on filing our claims, especially, when it came to investigating the damage of the house, the quality and the value of the house. I was impressed with the service that they rendered. I was impressed, too, with the cleanup by the Corps of Engineers.

The contractor did a pretty good job except we tried to save the pump-house and the well. It was a waste of effort, but, at least at the time, it looked like it was the thing to do. We tore that section of the house down where the well was to make sure that it would not be damaged and we had a pumphouse built over the well so that it wouldn't freeze. When

they tore the house down they had no trouble avoiding it, but then when they cleaned up they knocked a hole in the foundation of the pumphouse.

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

C: I felt that the people that were working for HUD, setting up these trailers, were out to make a buck and to pick up anything that they could lay their hands on.

S: Without divulging any names, were there any that you were aware of that submitted fraudulent claims?

C: No, the only one that I know about was one that I read in the paper, but I didn't know them personally.

S: As you look back on the flood, from this present perspective, do you see it as some type of divine punishment or a man-made disaster?

C: It was a man-made mistake.

S: Can you find fault with any individual or group?

C: The construction of the dam was at fault. It is quite clear to the panel who investigated it. They concluded that it was probably the construction and faulty design. Based on what happened, that must have been the case. There was no earthquakes or anything out of the ordinary that could have brought about the collapse of that dam, except human error.

S: Do you have any bitterness?

C: No, just tiredness.

S: Do you think the dam should be rebuilt?

C: It doesn't really matter. I think in view of the energy shortage, that the dam would serve a valuable purpose of generating more electricity. It would probably help some people with irrigation. It would provide some recreational area but most of that doesn't concern me except the energy part.

- S: How has the disaster effected the community?
- C: Its changed the character of the community.
- S: For better or for worst?
- C: Salem, in particular, had a number of people leave. Especially older people, who were hard struck by it because they lost all their homes and everything. There have been a number of people who have moved in. There is at least two building projects going on. People have sold land. It has been subdivided, used for building lots, one out in north of Salem and right here in the central part of Salem.
- S: How has the flood changed your life?
- C: It has made us spend a good deal of time at home working on rebuilding, recovering, and getting situated. I postponed a writing project that I have been working on for many years. It's been a strain on emotions particularly on the family. Living in such close quarters, we aren't use to it. We are use to more space. It was quite gratifying to know that so many of our relatives were willing to get in and help. When the disaster struck a number of them gave us gifts, money gifts, and others sent clothes and food.
- S: Are you better off today than you were a year ago?
- C: How do you mean better off?
- S: You have a newer home?
- C: Its going up.
- S: Financially, are you in better shape?
- C: I don't think we will be in better shape financially. I hope that after everything is settled that we are not further in debt. I think that is one of the things that we have been really concerned about. That is one of the

reasons why I have taken so much time to do many things, but we could avoid that and not get into that kind of trap. There is no doubt that our home is newer, but that will increase the insurance and taxes. Its hard to tell whether we'll be better off financially or not. I hope we will not be in debt.

S: How have your children held up through this?

C: Generally, pretty well. Lisa, our three-year-old, had a hard time sleeping alone. She would not sleep alone until we moved back from the trailer. She had to sleep in a room with somebody and she ended up sleeping with Blair who was six months old because she didn't want to be left alone. She has outgrown that now. Otherwise, I don't know of any other problems.

S: Do you worry about other disasters now that you have been through one?

C: I'm a little more sensitive. When we watch television or read in the newspaper about something happening, we comment with more feeling and have more sympathy and empathy for those unfortunate people. For instance, the tragedy of the Fireman's Supper Club in Kentucky. It seemed so close like it was down in Idaho Falls or something. Then we heard that many people were burned and it made us sick.

S: Are there any other areas or anything else on this disaster you would like to comment on?

C: I think that a number of people talked about trying to record and recover reminiscencies here in the Salem area, but we have been so preoccupied with getting things done and rebuilt that we haven't bothered to do too much about preserving any memories. I think, in my professional point-of-view, looking at the folklore that would be developed out of this bad experience, and particularly those who see a really definite religious meaning to it, it would be interesting to look at. In fact, we have a neighbor over