TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Shanna Ricks
Interviewed by
Richard Stallings
June 23, 1977

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information contained in the interview with

SHARON L. RICKS, I,  RICKS COLLEGE

(name, please print) (interviewer, print)

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Interviewer's Signature

June 23, 1977

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Interviewee's Signature

Date

6-23-77
ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Shanna Ricks
INTERVIEWER: Richard Stallings
DATE: June 23, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

S: Where were you born?
R: Sugar City, Idaho.
S: How long have you lived there?
R: I'm 44, so about 36 years of my life was spent there.
S: What do you do for a living?
R: I'm a secretary for the Brigham Young University-Ricks Center.
S: What was your address at the time of the flood?
R: Austin Avenue, Sugar City.
S: Is this your present address today?
R: No, I'm two blocks west of there. I traded property with my niece.
S: Did you own your own home?
R: Yes.
S: Were you involved in any other activity other than farming or any kind of business activity?
R: No.
S: When they were considering building the dam, did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?
R: That's hard to answer. Being a woman, I wasn't up on what it all entailed. They told me we needed it for irrigation and saving the water. The purpose was so we weren't flooded. I couldn't understand this because living there all those years, I had never been flooded. It came down one time just to our yard and it wasn't anything to speak of. However, it was fine with me. At the time
it was being built I did make trips up there. I couldn't understand how it was going to hold. I made this comment to many people, family or friends, because it didn't look like it was going to hold.

At the time the Palisades Dam was built, I lived at Freedom, Wyoming, for a short time. We traveled back and forth and I was impressed about how it was worked in and how they used the same type of soil that was on the mountain side, layers of different soils. I couldn't understand this other one.

S: How many are in your family?
R: I have three children at home and then I have my mother with me who is eighty-one-years-old.

S: There were five people living with you at the time of the flood?
R: Yes.

S: Did you or any member of your household have any premonition of the disaster?
R: I thought about that. I didn't have a premonition. It was a strange thing, we are in the process of moving into that home from the other home that I just sold. My one daughter who was fifteen and myself were the only ones at home. I'd been working out in the yard. My daughter got up a little later. I said, "Let's run over to Rexburg and have a bite of breakfast." When we got over there, I said, "By golly, I've got to get a check cashed because J.B.'s won't cash a check." When I went to get the check cashed, instead of cashing one for $10, I cashed one for $50. I never knew why I did such a thing, because its not a habit to do that. I had $50 in my purse and we went to breakfast. We got back home around 10:00 in the morning and I hadn't taken my purse out of the car. I always take it out, but I didn't. We went back out in the yard and worked. We were working when they came and told us about the flood. I jumped in the car. I had some money. I thought there must have been some reason why I wrote that check. Its always been strange to me.
Do you remember who told you about the flood?

Yes, my daughter's girlfriend, Cathy Orr, eighteen-years-old, came on her motorcycle and she said, "Mrs. Ricks, the dam has broken. We're going to be flooded." I said, "Cathy, we won't get flooded." She said, "Yes, we will. They told us up on the ballfield to get home to our families." I said, "My gosh, what should we do?" I stood there in the yard wondering what to do for a minute or two. She ran on home to her folks and they could hardly believe it. With that, I said to Louise, "I wonder what I should do?" I was using my bosses lawn trimmer and I put it in the utility room and shut the door. I walked toward the front of the house and I started in the house. I said, "I guess I will be back right away. I guess there's no need of worrying about anything." With that I looked at the foundation of the house and I said to Louise, "That foundation is pretty high; I think, we'll be all right." With that I started over to my neighbors to put the bikes in.

Paul Mortensen, in his pickup, came by and said, "Shanna, get Louise and get out of here. The dam's broken." This was at a quarter after twelve. We hoped in the car and left. Another thing, I had filled the car with gas. I didn't have to stop anywhere for gas, I just headed out. We had the radio on and were listening to it and seeing the traffic. I missed them saying to go to the college or to a hill. I took off and went to Idaho Falls to my sisters. I must have really been in shock, not realizing what would happen because we didn't take any clothing. We were in our rags working in the yard. My daughter, Louise, is a diabetic and I didn't have her needles or insulin. We were able to get some, being in Idaho Falls, but we could have been stranded really bad if I hadn't been somewhere like that. I had no idea what would entail. I thought it would be a little bit of water, up to my foundation.

You didn't try to take any household goods with you then?
R: No, I didn't have anything except my car and my daughter. My other two daughters were in Clearfield, Utah, with their father. My mother was out to my sisters while we were moving.

S: Did you see the flood coming?

R: No, we didn't see the water except on television.

S: Did you notice a lot of people leaving at the same time you were?

R: Yes, by the time I was leaving, the roads were loaded with people. They were pulling into the gas station in lines. It crossed my mind, they told us to keep our cars full of gas in the past and I use to kid my dad because he would put a dollars worth of gas in it at a time, because he lived right by a gas station. For some reason I had a full tank of gas.

S: Did you and your daughter talk about the flood as you drove out to Idaho Falls?

R: Yes, we were wondering what would happen and if everyone got out. I was wondering about my brother and his wife because they live right by us. I hadn't found them. Many things went through our minds. We realized that we didn't go over to the other house that we were moving out of. We neglected to go there. I didn't shut the doors or anything. My son's car was sitting in front of the house. I hadn't picked it up, which I could have driven out and my daughter driven mine. I didn't do that. I really was in shock.

S: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

R: Not really at that time. I've heard a lot of stories. Some people had some real exciting things happen. My brother just about got caught in it. He was out on the Salem Highway trying to get to his farm north of Meyers Brothers. He got to the Salem Church just as it hit the Salem Bridge. He made a U-turn and darted back to Rexburg, realizing he couldn't make it to the bride. He took off on a side road to Hibbard and got out. The water was following him.
S: Where did your family stay during the first two or three days of the flood?
R: We were with my sister, Iris Beattie, in Ammon for a few days and they helped me get up here and get the few things that we could salvage. My son and his wife helped me. We stayed at the home of Bill Hill in Ucon. I traveled back and forth because we took our things to his garage to store. I was able to get an apartment here in town up on the hill. My family came home and then we stayed there until we got the HUD trailer the end of July.

S: You've lived in the HUD trailer until just recently?
R: Yes, we lived in the HUD trailer from July until May 1.

S: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property?
R: We came back to Rexburg on Sunday, the day after. We couldn't get to Sugar City. They wouldn't let us through. I wasn't prepared to wade in the water. We came back on Monday morning with waders and waded in from the Moody Road into our home.

S: What were you anticipating as you went towards your home?
R: I still thought I'd see my home all right, until we started seeing things on the way in. Walking in and seeing all the homes gone, the telephone poles over and the water still running a little bit, I walked with my eyes moving everywhere. I couldn't find landmarks. I would think "What was there?" We'd say, "So and so's house was there." or "Some building was there, look it's gone." Even when I got to my own home, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was wrapped completely with barbed wire fencing and a corral. The garage was torn off. The furnace and the windows were all broken out. I couldn't get in. Everything was barred with wire. I made my way around to the back. It was just my daughter and I. I was trying to find a way in. My house was a little bit low, so it was still in water.
I was able to jump up into the west window. It was broken completely out. You could take your hand clear around it and there wasn't any glass to cut it. I jumped up into there. It looked like an egg beater had been in there. The mud was up to my knees. The water had been six feet high in it. I had just remodeled. The cabinets, they had all floated and broken apart. My mother's treasures, all her furniture were completely ruined. I went from room to room.

The main thing I wasy trying to do was make my way to my bedroom to find my diamonds. I knew that they were on the top of the chest of drawers when I left. When I got to my bedroom, it was in a mess. Everything was broken up. The mirror was broken off the dresser and was underneath the dresser. The beds were torn up. The things that were on the beds were dry. The beds had floated and come back down. Everything on them was dry and hadn't been touched. My closet of clothes was a muddy mess. They had dropped down in the mud. The chest of drawers had gone up and down where it was and the top of the chest was against the wall. I put my hand down in the mud and I found my rings.

S: You recovered all your diamonds then?
R: Yes.
S: What kind of things did you think about as you walked through the house; through this watery mucky mess?
R: I couldn't believe my eyes. We would think of something and would look for it. We'd cry and then we'd see something that would make us laugh or someone would come by and say something that was jovial. This is the one thing that kept us all going. People would stick their heads through the window and say, "My word Shanna, are you this dirty of a housekeeper?" It would bring you out of it for a few minutes. You'd walk around in it and then you'd sit down and cry. You'd come out of it and start picking up something. You'd say, "I bet I can save this."
I thought my clothes were completely ruined, they could never be cleaned. To my amazement I found out the next day that you could wash the mud out and do pretty well on most of them. The furniture, of course, was gone. I found my albums. I searched for the albums and all the pictures of my children were gone. All the pictures I had of myself as a child that I had saved for them were gone. Everything was gone at my mothers. I felt so sorry for her at her age, nothing to come home to. Nothing to see but a big mess.

I couldn't imagine what I was going to do at that time. We didn't have any idea that we would have any help. We were hoping, but we didn't know. Making the living for the family myself, I was very concerned. I didn't know how I was ever going to manage getting a home back. We searched the house, looked it over and saw what had to be done.

We made our way two blocks west to my other home, which I had just moved out of. It was ruined also. Things you saw were so strange. In my living room, my piano was sitting a total wreck. Yet, in the same room right by it, was a bookcase and all the shelves were out but one. On that shelf were knick-knacks from all over the country, some from Spain and Hawaii and things that had been given to me for gifts through the years. I had put them all there because I was going to pack them. That shelf was there and they hadn't even moved. Yet, all my books were gone and my piano was a total wreck. You couldn't imagine things. You'd dig down in the mud and you'd find things and save them. I found a bowl that had been in our family for over a hundred years buried in the mud and it wasn't even cracked. Then you'd find some little thing broken or gone completely.

S: What were the damages that you suffered as a result of the flood?
R: We lost everything but what was in the upstairs bedroom. I had one upstairs bedroom. We had carpeted it and put my daughters' bedroom up there and their
clothing. It was all saved. Otherwise, we salvaged dishes and what clothing we could, our bedding and things of this type. All our furniture was destroyed and our home was destroyed.

S: Where did they find your son's car?
R: We never found it. It was a yellow Toyota with a Utah license and we never found it. No one has been able to find it that we know of.

S: What was the most cherished item you lost in the flood?
R: I think even after a years time things come to your mind that you really miss. The things that I miss myself are the things I had as a child that I kept. For instance, a small doll bed and pictures. I had lots of pictures through my years and my children's years, pictures of my father and all that I don't have. This is very heartbreaking because these things can't be replaced. We missed the things we had because they were ours and we'd grown attached to them. You can replace a home. A home is where you are we found that out too. Even a HUD trailer was home. You can't replace those things that were of paper. Our keepsakes, I had a Treasures of Truth that I had made in my MIA years and it was completely ruined. I can't salvage any of it. These are the things that I miss.

S: How did you go about cleaning up your property?
R: I started out by hauling it away--Bill Hill, with his truck, and my family helped me. We hauled everything out that we could salvage and took it to his place and cleaned it up and stored it. So many confusing things went on. They told me the house was destroyed so never mind cleaning it out. I didn't dig my house out, it was so terrible. Two months later they told me it had to be cleaned out. The mud had dried and it was a real problem. It was something that I couldn't do alone. I happened to get to the high school and they
had some of the help come in. Four young men about nineteen years of age from Salt Lake City came and they went down with me. They cleaned every bit of it out. They scooped out mud, ripped up the carpet and took out the furniture and cleaned it as far as getting all of the mud out. The crews came along and took away the garbage. We took care of it that way. That is how I got it cleaned out. As it dried, the floor caved in and buckled.

S: So they finally destroyed your home?

R: Yes.

S: Did you have any feeling as you saw it?

R: I didn't go over to see it go. It was there one day and gone the next. I didn't want to see them take it away.

S: Did you have any problems with this?

R: I had some real problems over that deal because the engineers said it was totaled in the beginning and then they turned around and said it wasn't totaled. Even though the engineers said it had about $21,000 worth of damage they still wouldn't say it was totaled. How could you put $21,000 into nothing but a junk heap. It was an old home to boot. It didn't seem like the right thing to do. I had some hassle that way. Finally, they did decide that it was over the bracket and it was totaled.

The confusing things that disturbed me was you'd hear one thing and then another. You'd accomplish one thing and then they would say do something else. It was hard on me. I was trying to keep going with my job and to keep my family under control, and trying to iron these things out alone.

S: How were your children taking this?

R: They took it quite well. However, my twelve-year-old took it quite emotionally. When she got into school, we noticed it. My fifteen-year-old, the diabetic, was
here with me and she got a very bad throat. For several months she was under a doctor's care. She couldn't get better. She lost a tremendous amount of weight and I was worried about her. In the trailers through the winter, with them trying to study at that age bracket you can imagine with an eighty-one-year-old lady and a twelve-year-old child, it was hard. My two older daughters tried hard to stay on the honor roll all year. Yet, they were emotional. You'd find yourself very tense; it was easy to cry at times.

S: Did you have any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operation?
R: I don't know about that question.
S: Did you suffer any type of vandalism or other forms of lawlessness to your property?
R: No, I didn't. There was never anything touched. No destruction of any kind. No problems that way.
S: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?
R: They helped me with Red Cross money to get some clothing for my mom and for all of us. They helped us that way. They did give me a little for some gas where I had to travel back and forth. Then the government helped me get an apartment. They were very good.
S: Did the L.D.S. church help?
R: Yes, they were good. They made it known that we could go there and get groceries, types of clothing, pillows and bedding or anything we needed. I couldn't have asked for anything better than what the church did, the government and the Red Cross. The Red Cross and the church did much right at the beginning. I don't think that we could have made it without them.
S: As you began the process of rebuilding, which government agency did you deal with?
R: I didn't go to any of them. I had some contractors give me bids and I started looking what type of a home I could get for my income bracket and my reimbursement from the government. What would be satisfactory for my size of family. I was finally able to find something that would be adequate. I couldn't go rambler style because it was too expensive. I went to a two-story with a bedroom on the main floor for my mother.

I was able to find a contractor in Idaho Falls, Jim Merrett, that I have known for about 11 or 12 years. He was good. Last November, he got the bids on the material for it and he showed me them. He worked with me. He was cautious as he purchased things. He brought me the bills and we paid them. Therefore, I knew I wasn't going to have the money out and not the bills paid. He was very kind. He helped me in many ways. With never experiencing this before I didn't know what kind of materials to use, doors, windows and insulation. I went with the best. You can slide by a little cheaper on some things. I have a lovely home now. He built it in two months. He started the 8th of February and was through with his part by the 8th of April. It was nice.

S: Were the Bureau of Reclamation officials easy to work with?

R: I found them quite pleasant. Whenever I asked them for advice, they were quite good about giving it out. The verifier that came and looked over the home with me was polite and nice. They seemed to be fine. However, when I got my claim back, they had cut me $11,000. This threw me because I didn't know how I would ever manage. They'd only allowed me $25.00 a square foot for building my home. I knew I wouldn't be able to build for awhile. They way it looked, it was going to be terrible. This was one thing that bothered me because my mother and I were completely out of debt before the flood. We owned our home, we owned everything in it. We didn't owe anybody. I was prepared to put my
daughter through college. I don't make that kind of money to be able to do all these things over again on my own. When this came back $11,000 cut, I didn't know what to do.

I went back to them, made an appointment, and they were willing to talk to me and I went over it with them and they were very kind. They even spotted mistakes that I didn't. A few things I understood, for instance, I put in for the water heater because they said to put in for everything. I understood that was included in the house bid. That was fine. However, the cabinets they told me would be okay because they were not hooked to the wall yet. I payed $1600 for brand new cabinets. They were going to put them through as furniture. When I detected that they hadn't done that, they said, "That's in the house bid." I said, "Not really because they were furniture. They were bought and I can't be out the money." When they looked at the house bid, they left them out there too. I was cut both ways. They corrected that. The man was kind and he looked it all over and said, "I can see some mistakes that you hadn't seen and I'll go over these and re-evaluate and see what we can do." He kept it overnight and called me in the next day. They only cut me $2000 so I felt good. I could understand the $2000. I could see where I had doubled it or figured in with the house bid. I signed the paper and within a few days I had my check. Everything was fine. I'm grateful for it. I appreciate the help that they gave me, the kindness.

S: How would you evaluate their effectiveness? Were they efficient, well organized?

R: By then they were. In the beginning I didn't think they were too organized. I'm sure no one was at that time. They had a big job ahead of them. There was one thing that I couldn't understand and that's the difference in what they would do for people. I feel like, in a way, they should come up with a reasonable price per foot, on any home because everybody's building. Everybody
had to build. I thought it should be a little more fair that way. I know of some people that got quite a high price for each square foot. Some people got a lot lower than I did. I don't feel that this is right. I felt that everyone was in it and everyone should have gotten reimbursed for it. If they had to rebuild, they should have all received the same price per square foot.

On household furniture and this type of thing, I don't know what they did, but they kind of went by what people put in. Therefore, that was a difference too. For instance, I put in for a dining room set for $200. That was beserk. I haven't found one yet for under $500. I don't know how you come out on top. They say you came out on top. Everybody's coming out on top, but I haven't found out how. It took the money from the Bureau and the money from the sale of my other home to build the house I got to be out of debt.

S: Did you deal with any state officials?
R: No.
S: How about local county officials, mayors, sheriffs?
R: I talked to the mayor occasionally to find out things that were to be done.
In Sugar City I wanted to know what rights we had. I was all for a double-wide or a triple-wide trailer home on a foundation. The main reason was, I could get it quicker and I needed it because of my mother. I needed to get her somewhere. They wouldn't okay it. I think its great you don't have that kind of thing in your home town, but they should have stopped and figured the elderly people can not build and go through all that. I don't think that would have been too shabby. The mayor and the city council of Sugar City just as soon as not see me. I kid them about it now because I think they used to want to turn and run when I came towards them. I wanted to get in a home so bad and I couldn't see how I was ever going to build.
S: How was your mother taking all of this?
R: She took it quite well. She would be very emotional and then she would slump and be very depressed. It seemed something would pick her up and she would come back and be pretty good. When she realized that we were going to get help and that we would have a home, it seemed to give her hope. She came back good.

S: Did you find this was putting a lot of pressure on you, taking care of your mother and your children alone?
R: Yes.

S: Was there any time you went by yourself and wept?
R: Yes, there were times when I did go and cry it out so they wouldn't see that it was getting me down. There were times when I would have liked to have gone in the flood. I kid now and say, "I'll go with the next one."

S: Your not sure you're really kidding though? Do you feel that there were individuals that were involved with this recovery that took advantage of people or of the government?
R: Yes.

S: Without involving names do you know of any experiences?
R: Yes, I know of a few that put in for things that they didn't have, especially in the beginning. I know some that really put in for quite a bit more and they got it. I'm sure that this is why they clamped down on it, because they couldn't go the full amount for everybody. I'm sure the government couldn't stand much more. I don't know how they've stood this much. I'm sure that damaged us. I know of one person that did come out fortunate. Their house was only damaged in the basement and they got a tremendous amount of money back. This does make it sad.
S: Did you receive any help from any other sources other than what we've mentioned?
R: Yes, I received help from family that were out of this state and were not involved in it. They were from Nampa, California. They sent me some money and clothing and gave me access to anything that we could use. I was surprised when a check from The Idaho Statesman was handed to me by Jay Risenmay of the college.

I'd like to mention the Brigham Young University of Continuing Education which I work for. They didn't know what to do. They knew that we were being taken care of with food and clothing. They put a kitty on the desk for a week or two and whatever came in they divided with the ones that were involved in the flood. Brother Stan Petersen, our Division chairman, brought it up to us and it really helped. It was helpful the things that everyone did for us.

I went into a cafe one day in Idaho Falls to eat and I went to pay the ticket and they said its been paid because the people knew that we were in the flood. They had picked up the tab. Things like this were very kind.

S: Did you find it hard to accept this kind of help?
R: Yes, it was hard to accept it. You didn't know quite how to act. You'd say, "Thank you." What a little thing, two words. How can you say thank you for them putting you back on your feet. I owe my thanks to everyone. My boss was very understanding about all the problems of being able to get back on our feet and recovering through it. Its been quite an experience. One that I'll never forget. In looking back through the things, now that we've moved into our home, its very strange. We find things and shed a few tears still, but its about over and I'm hoping that everyone will soon be in their homes.

S: How do you feel about it now, a year later?
R: Very relieved, mixed emotions. I'm thrilled with my home and being back together. I'm glad to be back in Sugar City. I didn't think I'd want to go there. It does seem nice to drive back home now. I'm thankful that
we're all well, alive. We've found that we can go through a disaster and come back all right.

S: In fact, you're probably a little better than you were before.
R: Yes.
S: Do you feel the flood was some type of divine punishment, a natural disaster, or even a man-made disaster?
R: I don't think they planned it to be a disaster. I feel like it wasn't done right and it was bound to happen. I don't think it was a divine thing. It happened. I did feel like the Lord must have had some hand in saving us. If it had gone in the night, we would never have lived through it. We could of all been dead. I feel like he had a hand in protecting us, but I feel like it was something that happened. I don't feel like it was a punishment.
S: Do you have any bitterness within you?
R: No, I'm sorry it happened.
S: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt?
R: If you ask my sixteen-year-old daughter she'd say, "No way!" She was here and is frightened to death of it. If they find a better place, whether its up further and they find the right type of fill, fine. I wouldn't want it built until they knew it would be all right.
S: How has the disaster changed your life?
R: That's rather hard to answer. I think its put us in a different bracket. In a way you feel like you have money, but you really don't. Its gone now; its gone back in for replacements. I feel like people have a tendency to look at what the other guys has now. We used to say, "Look at that new home going up." Now its, "Gosh, look at what they've got. I wish I would have thought of that, maybe I would have got that." It put me in a different category. I don't make any more and I've got the same sized family, but I've
got a newer home, so my taxes go up and this is going to be rough on me. I have higher fire insurance. Its putting a bind on me.

S: Are you better off financially now than a year ago?

R: Yes, because during the time I'd been living in the HUD trailer, I watched pretty careful. We didn't go out and spend a lot because we had the money. We were careful so we were able to stay out of debt. I've paid the little things off. I was able to keep my monthly bills taken care of like utilities. Now, I'm all right. Its the future that worries me because of the high taxes and the fire insurance.

S: How is the community going to change? How will Sugar City fare after a year or so?

R: I think it will be a beautiful place. I'll be glad when the church is back the same as everyone else. I think this will bring a closeness back. We've lost the touch between our ward members. They are scattered. Another thing, we go to different wards because its more convenient the driving clear to Teton, especially in the wintertime with bad weather. Sometimes its easier to go somewhere else so therefore we loose touch with friends and families. I think when everyone's back in their homes it will be the same happy place. At the moment, its not like it was.

S: There are still effects then?

R: Yes, its not the same. People that are in their homes are settled. I've only been in one a month, but I feel like I'm home. There are others that are still struggling. I feel for them. There are some that are in the middle of getting done and there are some in trailers that don't know what their going to do. They still haven't been able to get settlements. There are still a lot of mixed emotions. I'll be glad when everyone is back in. We've even talked about going from house to house and having one of those
progressive suppers or something so that we can visit and enjoy everyone again.

S: Will your attitude toward this disaster change as you get older?

R: I think so, its changed now. I hated everybody and everything for a little while because I was upset emotionally. I didn't know which way to turn. Now, it's not like that. We're happy as a family now.

S: Thank you very much, Mrs. Ricks.