TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Eric Smith
Interviewed by
Christina Sorensen
September 1, 1977

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

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

Eric Smith
(name, please print)

I, Christina Sorensen
(interviewer, print)

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Christina Sorensen
Interviewer's Signature

1 Sept. 1977
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.

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, **ERIC LARSON SMITH**, 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.

**Eric L. Smith**

Interviewee's Signature

**Sept. 1, 1977**

Date
ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Eric Smith

INTERVIEWER: Christina Sorensen

DATE: September 1, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

C: Eric, would you spell your name please

E: Eric Smith.

C: Thank you. Eric, how old are you?

E: I'm 23.

C: And where were you born?

E: Salt Lake City.

C: And what do you do for a living?

E: I'm a student and I also do remodeling on old houses.

C: Now, you were a volunteer during or immediately following the flood in Rexburg. When you first heard that the dam had broken, what was your initial reaction to that news?

E: My initial reaction was that I have relatives that live nearby in a town called Shelley, and my first thought was wondering if it was going to affect them at all.

C: Were you in contact with them? Did you find out if it had?

E: I was in contact with their daughter who lives here in Salt Lake and she didn't know at first because some of the lines were out and there were a lot of people calling up there and so it was hard to get in touch. But just by following the news I saw that it really wasn't going to affect that part of the state.
C: Now, when you saw the broadcast on the news and the pictures of it and everything, were you surprised that it was that bad or, did it in any way affect you?

E: I was surprised that a dam would break. I'd never heard of a dam breaking, and especially one so close. And I'd always heard that they were quite destructive. But when I saw the pictures and everything it didn't seem quite as impressive as when I saw the dam in real life.

C: Now, when you had, how long after the flood did you actually go up?

E: I think it was about a month after.

C: And what motivated you to sign up and volunteer to do this?

E: Well, I knew that the people there needed help and I had a pretty flexible schedule and there was no problem in going up there. And I thought it would be interesting as well as doing something nice for someone else.

C: Now, do you remember approximately what time you left that day to go up and what were the arrangements as far as, did you have to pay money to do this or how long did the trip take? What time did you get back at night?

E: I was put in charge of a small group of volunteers as far as getting food together and that's the only thing we had to pay for was our own food. And we were supposed to be at a certain place at I think 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning and we were supposed to get on a bus and we would be taken to Rexburg.

C: Do you recall approximately what time you got up there?

E: I think probably around 8:00 or 9:00 but I don't know for sure.

C: Now, were you assigned some place to go then once you got up there?
E: Yes, it was very well organized. There were people there to meet us at where the buses let us off to work, about six busloads of from what I remember. And they would just assign us out in small groups to go to different people's homes and then help different people like that.

C: So where were you assigned?

E: We went to, the group that I was in went to two houses near the outskirts of Rexburg and part of our group went to one house and part went to the other house. And they were about, about a block apart, the houses, because it was kind of a rural area.

C: What sort of conditions were these places in or the place where you worked?

E: I had expected it to be worse. But there had been a lot of cleaning up that had gone on. I had heard stories of mud in the basements of five or six feet deep and mud all through the houses, things like this. When we got there the houses inside were pretty generally cleaned up and there was about two feet of dirt on the people's lawns which had been, which was the, the silt that had dried already. And the roads were cleaned off. But generally mostly the things that what I still noticed in that part of town from the dam was just about a foot and a half or two feet of silt.

C: So what kind of things did you do during that day, what sort of work did they have you do?

E: We helped unbury a woman's hedge and we started digging out her lawn.

C: So it was mostly like outside kind of...

E: And we did move some boxes for her of things that hadn't been cleaned very well.
C: Now, you got to meet some of the people then, I take it?
E: Yes.
C: The owners of the home and everything? What did their attitude seem to be at this point, and did you have any response to them as people, you know, the way they were?
E: They were very friendly and cheerful and they were talkative and joking. Even though this disaster had hit, the people that we worked with felt quite lucky that no more damage had been done. They still had their homes and they were quite nice to us, the volunteers, and made us feel right at home. We ate lunch with them and after we'd been working for a while the owner of one of the homes said, "Why don't you just take a break for a while before we have to take you back to the bus? We'll drive you around up through Sugar City where the, where the whole town is almost evacuated and no one's going to move back from what I understand." And he drove us through there and showed us some of the damage where it was still quite plain the damage that'd been done and where dirt and logs smashed up against the sides of houses. Almost looked like beaver dams. And railroad tracks that had been moved hundreds of yards. And he drove us to the dam and we saw that. But it was kind of interesting the way the, the attitude of the, of those people that they were just so bright and cheerful.
C: How did you feel when you got to drive around and see the communities and then actually went up and saw the dam? Do you remember having any particular thoughts about the over-all destruction?
E: Yeah, I was glad that we were able to go through some of the other areas because Rexburg was pretty well cleaned up by that time and
Sugar City hadn't been touched. And so I was able to see the real destruction that was caused. And when I saw the dam, I was totally amazed at the size of it. The pictures on the television and in the newspapers made it look like nothing big, but it was, it was just huge and there was a big crack in it.

C: There's been some talk about the cause of the dam breaking and, of course, most people, have accepted the idea that it was a manmade failure. And yet a few people have expressed the idea that it was perhaps some kind of divine punishment for the people's sins. How would you feel about that kind of an idea?

E: Well, I kinda think it was a manmade error. I think that if the people of that area were anything like the people that we helped out, I don't think it was punishment for their sins because they seemed to be good people. And the organization that was there was due largely to various church groups and I don't think they were being punished for anything.

C: Now, at the end of the day when you came back, do you recall, when you got back, approximately what time?

E: I think it was around 9:30 or 10:00.

C: Do you remember how you felt?

E: I was really tired. A lot of that came though with the bus ride. Bus rides tire me out. But we had worked hard that day and it, we'd been up since early morning. But it was kind of a good feeling getting back.

C: As you look back on this experience do you think that there was any way in which any of your values or attitudes or beliefs were changed by this experience? Or if there's any particular kind of effect that it has had on you, making you maybe think about somethings that you hadn't thought about before?
E: I never thought about being hit by a flood before and it caused me to think how, how easy it would be for destruction to take place such as that. I thought about always living on a hillside someplace after that.

C: Did you have any particular, well, I guess the best way to describe it or say it would just be sort of a spiritual experience at all or feeling or reaction to what you saw and to the people?

E: Could you repeat that?

C: Yeah. Sort of, if, and you may not have, and you just say if you didn't, but if you had any sort of a spiritual experience during that day or in thinking about it afterwards, any kind of a spiritual response to the experience of volunteering and also to the people and their situation and the kinds of thoughts that it brought up in your own mind?

E: Uh-huh. I always feel spiritually strengthened when I help other people out. And I also felt strengthened spiritually just by, by seeing these people and, and what they'd gone through and the attitude they had about things. And I was just seeing the, the things that the church that I belong to had done for the area and the ways that they were helping to relieve the, the inconvenience and suffering of the people strengthened, strengthened me spiritually.

C: Well, Eric, I don't have any more specific questions. Is there anything else that you'd like to say at this point or any other thoughts or feelings about the whole experience that you'd like to express?

E: I thought it was a lot of fun. I had a good time and all the people I went with had a good time and it's a, it was a good experience. I enjoyed it.

C: Thank you.