

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

John D. Nielson

Interviewed by

Richard Stallings

August 5, 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

JAMES P. NELSON, I, Richard H. Stalling

(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. Stalling
Interviewer's Signature

Apr 5 1977
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.

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, JOHN D. NELSON, 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.

John D. Nelson
Interviewee's Signature

Aug. 5, 1977
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: John D. Nielson

INTERVIEWER: Richard Stallings

DATE: August 5, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

- S: John, would you please spell your full name?
- N: John D. Nielson.
- S: Where were you born?
- N: Blanding, Utah.
- S: How long have you lived in the Rexburg area?
- N: Since 1968, that's about nine years.
- S: John, how old are you?
- N: Forty.
- S: Do you have a family?
- N: Yes.
- S: What size?
- N: Five children, the oldest one is ten and the youngest is sixteen months.
- S: What's your address?
- N: 138 North 3rd East, Rexburg.
- S: Was this your address at the time of the flood?
- N: Yes, it was.
- S: What do you do for a living?
- N: I teach geography at Ricks College.
- S: Do you own your own home?
- N: Yes.
- S: Are you involved in any other business in the area, such as farming?
- N: No.

- S: Ten years ago when they began talking about the Teton Dam there was some controversy, were you aware of the controversy?
- N: Yes, I was. I favored the dam.
- S: Why?
- N: Oh, I wasn't a farmer so it didn't concern me as far as irrigation, but I think they need irrigation water, they needed flood control. There was flooding along the river in various places and it just seemed like a good idea to me for a recreational site near Rexburg.
- S: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton Dam Disaster?
- N: None whatsoever. I took a summer school class up on a field trip about two weeks before it broke and we were standing there looking at the dam and I remembered commenting to the class how massive it looked and how indestructible it must be.
- S: Where were you and your family when the dam broke?
- N: We had gone on vacation down to Salt Lake and we were riding back home that Saturday and we heard it on the car radio.
- S: What was your reaction?
- N: Well, we were of course, concerned about it. We got conflicting reports. Some of the reports said that Rexburg wasn't touched while others said it was wiped out. We didn't know what to think and that night we stopped in Blackfoot where my wife's folks live. We stayed there that night and we saw the reports on television and one of the things we saw was a neighbor's house floating down the street so we knew it must have been fairly bad at our place. We came up the next day, Sunday morning, and saw our place which was pretty badly damaged.
- S: What time Sunday morning were you able to get back to your property?
- N: It was about 10:00 or 10:30 in the morning--something like that.
- S: Was there still water in the area?

N: Oh, not a great deal, most of the water had gone down. It was mainly mud around by then. I was surprised how fast the water had gone down. I expected to see more around than there was.

S: What kind of damage did you suffer at your home?

N: Well, the water was about eight feet deep at our house on the outside walls and was about five feet deep in side my living room, so virtually everything on the main floor was flooded and damaged and everything in the basement. We did have a small attice room that wasn't hurt, but the house was quite badly damaged and full of mud and debris and most of our personal effects were either badly damaged or completely ruined or gone. Our garage was gone. I had a detached garage and it and quite a few tools and things and a motorcycle and several things that I had in the garage were completely gone.

S: Did you ever find them?

N: Some of the things, I found some of my tools that were across the street and I found my motorcycle about a block away. It was ruined but I did find it.

S: Were you anticipating this kind of destruction when you were going back to your home?

N: No, I was quite surprised. I thought maybe if Rexburg was flooded it would have only been a foot or two or water. Of course, when I saw that house floating, I knew it must have been worse than that but, anyway, I was surprised when we got here how badly flooded everything was. When you go to a house that has been flooded and you see all of your books, I had the "Great Books" collection plus we figured we had around \$2,000 worth of books and they were all strewn all over the floor full of mud. Then you see clothing a pictures and various things that you've collected over the years all covered with mud and ruined, furniture and everything all ruined, it's quite a shock.

S: What were your feelings at this point?

N: I was a little surprised at my view. As I say, it was quite a shock to see how bad it was, but it didn't actually bother me as much as I thought it would. It didn't bother me nearly as much as it did my wife. My wife cried. She was just really shook up. Well, when we first saw the house she began crying and I didn't, I mean I didn't feel that way although I hated to see things ruined that we had. Well, it had happened to everyone and actually my main reaction was interest, I think. I was just interested in what had happened and, of course, amazed at it all. But I wasn't emotionally upset or sad or anything like that. It didn't affect me that way, in fact, it never did. This has been one thing that kind of surprised me. My whole reaction to it has been that I found it an interesting experience. Fortunately very few lives were lost. One thing, I think I would have been more upset if it had been only us that had suffered the damage, but when the whole town had suffered the same kind of damage, it sort of didn't seem quite so bad. I just found it an interesting experience.

S: Did you feel that your home and the items in it could be saved?

N: Well, some of them, but I don't know why I wasn't more upset about the loss of personal items. I guess I always sort of felt, although right at the time I didn't put it in words to myself or anyone else, but I always sort of felt quite optimistic about the future. I never felt that it was an irreplaceable loss or anything like that. I thought somehow we would either get things back or fix them or find some way of coping with it. It didn't really bother me all that much.

S: What was the most cherished item you lost in the flood?

N: Well, I suppose some of my books and some of the family pictures that we had. We had baby books on all of our children, pictures and certificates and various things they had been involved in. We had lost all of those. I suppose things like that.

- S: How did you go about cleaning up your property?
- N: Well, we just put on our old clothes and a pair of boots and some gloves and we got a shovel and carried all of the things out of the house that we could. We got some help from friends, some people from Idaho Falls came up and did quite a lot of work that first Sunday while we weren't there. Then we had some friends from the college come down and help us carry things out of the house. We just spent the whole day, day after day, for weeks actually, cleaning up and hosing things down and shoveling out. It was a lot of hard work. The feeling that I had then was that the house was not worth saving. It was an older home and there had been quite a bit of structural damage. The floor joists had been lifted up as if the house had tried to float but it hadn't quite been able to do it, but it had buckled the floor way up in the middle. There was other damage and there were cracks in it everywhere. Right from the first I didn't think it could be saved. So there was a feeling I had about cleaning it up that it was hard to put a lot of work into it beyond just shoveling the main stuff out and getting what stuff out that we could because I felt like it couldn't be saved anyway so why go to all that work and clean everything up. So we didn't actually. We didn't scrub it down and clean everything out, we just cleaned the main mud out and all of effect out of it and then left it at that.
- S: Were you right in your feelings that the house wasn't worth saving?
- N: Yes, it was assessed as being damaged beyond repair, it would have cost much more to fix it up than it was worth and so it was eventually torn down and we have since rebuilt on the same site.
- S: Did you receive any other help in cleaning the property, you mentioned some friends from Idaho Falls and the college?
- N: That was the main help, we did receive some help from some of the people from Utah and other parts of Idaho. They came here to help but by the time they

came most of our work was done. A group of people from some part of Utah came and helped us clean out our basement and helped us get our freezer and these large items we needed help with out. Then there was a lot of help from a group of people from Burley and Twin Falls area. They came up with trucks and loaders and backhoes and things and cleaned a lot of debris out of the yards. They really did an excellent job.

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

N: Oh, well, no particular single event, but I think all the cooperative spirit of everyone, the community working together and everyone sympathetic to everyone else and helping everyone else and neighbors. We talked to neighbors that we never said two words to before or they to us, you know, but suddenly they were standing in our living room and talking to us about what happened and we were in their living room talking to them about their problems. So there was a great feeling of community, I think, at that time, more so than I ever felt before.

Then I was very impressed with the way the church was so well organized to cope with the situation. We lived right next to the Stake Center and everyday we'd see bus load after bus load of people from other parts of Idaho and Utah mainly, coming in here to help and they would always walk right by our house as they distributed themselves around the neighborhood and around town. It was a very impressive thing and I think the outsiders that were here were quite impressed with that.

S: Did you have any problems that were frustrating to you during this cleanup operation?

N: Well, not actually during the cleanup. Most of those problems were just direct physical problems of how to get the refrigerator out of something like that. There wasn't any particular problem with that, but we did feel a lot of frustration later in deciding and knowing what to do, trying to figure out what to do. As I said before, our house was condemned but that wasn't

for a couple of months or more after the flood. Let's see, that was at least two months after the flood before we knew. So we had two months there that we didn't know what was going to be done with our house and how we were going to manage building another one, whether we were going to have to get another loan and how we could pay for two loans. That was very frustrating and it took us a long time to find out what was going to happen. We were very worried about how we were going to manage things. I should mention, too, that immediately after the flood we were offered a place to stay at Dave Crowder's place. We stayed there for about a month in his basement and so that was one thing we didn't have to worry about.

S: Then you were fortunate that you had some personal belongings that you had taken on your trip so you weren't really destitute in clothes?

N: That's right, although they were manily just camping type clothes, of course that's what you needed at that time. As far as clothes went, we were immediately inundated with clothes. The church started gathering clothing and up here at the college there was a whole room full of clothing and we did go up and get a few items of working clothing and then our families had gathered clothing from all over and sent it to us so we had all kinds of clothing. And then another thing happened, the Red Cross was here and that was something that I was really impressed with, the Red Cross. They were there immediately with money to help you buy immediate needs. Our family did get some help from the Red Cross for clothing.

S: Now, you mentioned that you stayed at the Crowder home for about a month, where did you move after that?

N: Well, I don't know, maybe it was longer than a month, it was until we got out HUD trailer. I forget how long it was, I guess it was maybe six weeks and then we moved into the HUD trailer.

S: What government agencies did you deal with in the cleanup and recovery operation?

N: Well, there was HUD and we talked with the Small Business Administration about a loan, in fact, we actually applied for one and it was approved but we never did actually use it. The Bureau of Reclamation.

S: How would you evaluate their effectiveness?

N: I was very impressed with them. Of course, it was kind of slow and all, but you could understand that because there was so much to do and so many people to deal with and all, but I was generally very impressed with them. I think that a major reaction of mine to the whole thing was that with all the bureaucratic inefficiency of government still they were here very soon and they were doing things and they moved all those houses and trailers in so quickly. Generally, I was very favorably impressed with the government agencies.

S: How about the state, did you find any need to deal with any state authorities?

N: No.

S: How about local officials, were you involved with any local officials?

N: No, nor really, nor directly. Of course, I'm sure the local police and officials were doing things, but I never had any direct personal contact with their dealings.

S: Did you suffer any forms of vandalism, lawlessness?

N: No, not at all.

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

N: Well, I know of those volunteers that came in and worked voluntarily, I don't feel that they did in any way. I kind of got the impression a little bit later during the time when they were setting up the HUD trailers that there were fly-by-night people around who were working for HUD who did not really know what they were doing, who were not really experts in their field. There were a lot of plumbers and carpenters and people setting up the trailers and so on that made all kinds of mistakes that had to be done over and over again.

That was something that we all talked about and were frustrated about. I think there were groups of people, I think they'd follow around these disasters and go from one to another and they take advantage of the government.

S: Were you a particular victim of any of this? Did your trailer have problems?

N: Yes, there were numerous problems of getting it set up, getting it there, connecting the sewer and water and electricity and so on. Well, they put the water and sewer line in the same trench which is, you know, against the law. It's not sanitary and that had to be dug up again and taken out and redone. Then the water, after they put the water in, it leaked and they had to dig it up and do it over again, that sort of thing and it was frustrating. The people acted like they had never done that sort of thing before, some of them, and didn't really know how to do it.

S: Once you were settled in the trailer, was it adequate?

N: Yes, we were very thankful for the trailer although it got a little tight. We have five children and my wife and I had this three bedroom trailer and there was very little privacy and we sort of got on each others nerves after a while. It was pretty tight living but it was adequate, we very much appreciate it.

S: Without divulging names, were you aware of anyone that filed fraudulent flood claims?

N: No, not specifically. You hears a lot of talk about it, sometimes in church people would talke about the morality of the claims and would make vague accusations that someone or another were claiming more than they should but I didn't know of any specifically myself. Actually, I think most people were fairly honest. The people I talked to seemed to be.

S: Did you feel that the flood was some type of punishment, divine punishment or was is more a natural or man-made disaster?

N: I feel that it was not a natural but a disaster, an accident, a result of human error in building, designing and siting, choosing a site for the dam. I didn't feel that it was divine retribution or anything.

S: Do you have any bitterness then to those who were guilty of the errors in design and construction?

N: No, I don't feel like it was a conscious thing. I don't think anyone set out to badly design the thing. It was just kind of a conglomeration of circumstances and perhaps some incompetence. But I don't think anyone made a lot of money out of using inferior materials or anything like that. I just feel like it is a combination of circumstances that resulted in that.

S: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt?

N: Well, I'm slightly apprehensive about it. However, I wouldn't be totally opposed to it. But I would want them to build a different kind of dam and not necessarily in the same location. I think that I would prefer a cement dam and one on a more carefully selected site although I understand that all up and down that part of the river the rocks are the same, of course, and we'd probably have similar kinds of problems.

S: How has the disaster changed your life?

N: Well, we now live in a brand new house and we used to live in an old house. So our home facilities are really nicer than they were before and in that sense we are better off. We received enough compensation for our old house to pay for the new house and so we have a new house and our house payments are the old payments on our old house which are fairly small and the interest rate is quite a lot lower than the present rate of interest. So we have a new house with small house payments which only lasts another ten years so in that sense we're financially, as far as our home is concerned, much better off. I think another way it has changed me is that I'm much more sympathetic and can identify more with disasters that happen elsewhere than I ever could

before. Before when I would read a newspaper and see on TV that there had been an earthquake or flood, or tornado or something somewhere in the world, I would just say hmmm, and isn't that too bad, but without really feeling what it was like. Now when there is a flood somewhere else, I can really identify with people and know what they are going through. Especially in other places where it was not a government dam that broke and the government responsible and therefore reimbursing us for the damage. Some of these people as far as natural disasters, they are not completely reimbursed like we have been.

S: What would you have done if the government had not reimbursed you?

N: Well, I think it would have been pretty tough. We certainly couldn't have afforded to build as nice a house as we have done and I suspect that without the governemtn reimbursement, we would have been living in a trailer house, something of that sort, maybe for years.

S: Has your family suffered any ill effects in the disaster?

N: Well, not obvious ones I don't think. There may be some deep seated psychological trauma that they're suffering from, I don't know. Once in a while my one daughter seems to have a bad dream about a tornado or an earthquake and that may---she may have gotten frightened by the flood, but for the most part, I don't detect any major problems.

S: How do you see the community resulting from this disaster? What effects did it have on Rexburg, Madison County?

N: Well, of course, there is a lot of new construction, a lot of new homes and everything, a lot of money has been spent and is being spent here so economically it has been a boom situation. And one thing that I wonder about is, there has been a lot of new businesses begin here and they're planning a new shopping mall north of town and I wonder if after the money is spent and the boom is over and we go back to business as usual, if the town can support all of

those. Maybe we might have over extended a little bit there and we may have some buildings lying empty and idle in a few years, apartment buildings that are not filled or offices of office space that is empty. I suppose the most aggressively managed businesses and better placed businesses will survive and some of the new ones and maybe some of the old ones won't survive.

Another thing that I think has been a result of this, kind of a subtle thing, is the relationships between those who were flooded and those who were not flooded in Rexburg. Some of those people who were flooded and have been reimbursed by the government and have built new homes and have new cars and so on, nicer than they had before, tend to feel a little bit guilty about this. I felt people who were not flooded were saying that, "Boy, you're sure lucky that this happened to you, you never would have had that without the flood," and so there is a little resentment there. I don't know how serious it is or how many people it affects, but I know my neighbor has been particularly conscious of this and talked about it a lot. I, myself, have felt some feelings that way a little bit. I wouldn't say guilty but kind of uneasy a little bit. Not totally comfortable with the fact that we do have a brand new home much nicer than the one we had before which we got because of the flood. I know and everyone else knows that I wouldn't have it if I hadn't been flooded so there is that little feeling and you wonder if other people are thinking that.

S: Will this last?

N: I don't know if it will or not. People may forget about it in time. I think some of the people up on the hill who were not flooded have another feeling, some of them, that they almost wished they had been. They feel a little left out maybe, more so earlier than now, but they were sort of not involved. They may have been helping someone who was flooded or may have had a business flooded or something, but they are not part of the club, part

of that group through the flood and I think that will be something too, that will be talked about in Rexburg for years. We'll say, "Before the flood and after the flood," and will count time from that. So it will affect people's thinking, it will affect people's relationships I think. I don't think it will be seriously disrupting or anything.

S: Well, John, thank you very much.