

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Tom E. Remington

Interviewed by

Mary Ann Beck

July 1, 1977

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY & RICKS COLLEGE

HISTORY DEPARTMENTS

COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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, Tom E. Remington, 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.

Tom E. Remington
Interviewee's Signature

7/6/1/77
Date

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of
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(name, please print)

, I, MARY ANN BECK

(interviewer, print)

knowingly and voluntarily permit the Milton R. Merrill
Library at Utah State University, the David O. McKay
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ical Society at Boise, Idaho, the full rights and use
of this information.

Mary Ann Beck
Interviewer's Signature

2/11/77
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Tom E. Remington

INTERVIEWER: Mary Ann Beck

DATE: July 1, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

- B: Mr. Remington, would you spell your name please?
- R: Tom E. Remington.
- B: Where were you born?
- R: Bancroft, Idaho.
- B: How long have you lived in Rexburg?
- R: Three years.
- B: How old are you?
- R: Forty.
- B: Do you have a family?
- R: Yes.
- B: How many were living in your home at the time of the flood?
- R: Five.
- B: What was your address at the time of the flood?
- R: Hibbard area, south of Rexburg.
- B: What do you do for a living?
- R: I work for the Soil Conservation Service.
- B: How long have you lived in this area?
- R: Three years.
- B: Did you own your own home?
- R: Yes.
- B: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?
- R: I supported it.

B: Why.

R: Because of the development that it would make possible; the increased agricultural production of the area. It would remove a lot of dry farm from that status and put it into the irrigatable land status.

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

R: We were at home.

B: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed?

R: Disbelief.

B: Did you try to save any household or personal items?

R: I took a few personal items with us in the car when we were told to leave the area and go to town.

B: Did you see the flood coming?

R: Yes, after being in town for some time.

B: Could you describe it?

R: It looked like a great wall of junk about 10-12 feet high. It was made up of parts of houses, barns, mobile homes, fences; whatever happened to be in the way of the water.

B: How did it look? What color was the water?

R: Surprisingly, it didn't seem to be the color of the soil. It seemed to be a reddish brown, very brownish, more like one would expect to see in the Mississippi River.

B: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed did you make any preparation to save any of your property or home?

R: I didn't make any preparations because the sheriff's office had sent people around informing the people to leave the area immediately. I had my family there and I decided that the best plan of action would be just to leave.

- B: In vacating the area where you lived, tell what happened to you and your family.
- R: It was uneventful because we left several hours before the water actually hit there.
- B: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?
- R: Only one. I talked my next door neighbor's pregnant wife into leaving with her children. She had six at the time and was due to have another one at any time. Luckily, I talked her into leaving and going to town.
- B: Did you see animals trying to escape the floodwaters?
- R: Yes.
- B: Will you describe their behavior?
- R: They were very tired. They struggled with the water and they couldn't make any headway toward the edge of the water. They could do it if they would keep with it, but that isn't the usual character of domestic animals. They fight it until they get tired, which these were doing, and they were very tired. They were about to go under. I talked a bull and a cow into coming out of the water; they just seemed to be ready to lay down and die. I got to talking to them and they seemed interested enough to get on their feet and crawl out. I did see an elk that was having no problem whatsoever. He was going right with the deepest part of the water and just going right along with it.
- B: Where did you and your family stay during the first 2 or 3 days after the flood?
- R: We stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Tom Spofford in Rexburg.
- B: Did you continue to stay there during the cleanup?
- R: Yes, for a period of time.
- B: What was your damage you suffered as a result of the flood?
- R: I lost a lot of personal textbooks, reference books in the office and engineering equipment that I had accumulated over the years. At home,

we lost shrubbery, lawns, garden, pastures, several items were left outside and were carried away either by the debris or the water. Some of the water got into my basement and ruined books, carpets and other things that were in the basement.

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

R: The work I put in on my place out there.

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

R: It was ten days before we could return to stay. It was about five days before we could get to it.

B: How did you get there and what was your first reaction when you viewed the destruction of your property?

R: The first time I saw it was about five days after the flood. We had to walk there about 2½-3 miles because the bridges were washed out. There were still large quantities of water running through the cuts in the roads that the flood had made. My first reaction was that I couldn't believe it hadn't done any more damage to my place than it had. I had gone by other places that were gone or torn apart. There were some large trees about half a mile from my place that were torn out. They were large cottonwood trees along the river. They were actually torn out and the bark torn off and tipped over and broken. I couldn't believe that my place hadn't suffered any more damage than it had.

B: How many feet of water was in your home?

R: I had about half a foot in the basement. It had seeped in. All of my basement windows had held. My house sits on a higher piece of ground. The water had gone down before it had a chance to get very much of it, but what got in there was laden with silt and something that smelled quite obnoxious. I don't know what it was.

B: How many inches of water was around your home?

R: Around the house, itself, about 20 inches. Out in the driveway, at the bottom of my lawn, probably about 3½-4 feet because it went over the engine of an automobile that was parked there.

B: Did you lose any other cars or trucks?

R: No, I lost the one in the driveway and two snowmachines in the back yard.

B: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the floodwaters rolling through the area?

R: All I could think of was that I hoped that everybody had been fortunate enough to have as much warning as we had.

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

R: My wife and I and our children picked up around the outside of the house as much as possible and washed things down. My wife poured several gallons of Purex in the well to get that functional again. My wife's relatives and my relatives came in and cleaned the basement which was an all day job for about six people. Afterward when we got to the heavy stuff, the debris and stuff that had been left by the water in the yard, the Soil Conservation Service contracts picked that up. A & J Construction Company from Homedale did the actual work.

B: What were some of the problems you were confronted with? What problems gave you the most frustration?

R: Working for the Soil Conservation Service I didn't have much time for frustration. I just left my stuff and what got done around our place was done by my wife, her family and some of our friends.

B: Did you receive any help in cleaning up your property?

R: Yes.

B: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experiences connected with the cleanup operation?

- R: About every place you turned you had an unusual experience. You were exposed to that day after day. The way people worked and how they kept their spirits up was really amazing. That is an uplifting experience.
- B: You worked quite close with the people didn't you?
- R: Yes, we were doing damage reports and supervising cleanup crews.
- B: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other form of lawlessness?
- R: No, I did not.
- B: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?
- R: None, I believe we didn't need it. We were well enough off in that we had our friends to stay with, the Spoffords. Our home wasn't destroyed just the property was torn up. Mrs. Spofford and my wife made repeated trips out there to take care of that. I was working anywhere from 12 to 16 hours a day and in turn everything just sort of took care of itself. We didn't think we needed any government aid.
- B: Did you receive any assistance from the L.D.S. or other church groups after the flood?
- R: Yes, I had meals with them. My wife and children didn't because they were living with the Spoffords. We were working with the Bureau of Reclamation at the fieldhouse at the college and they practically insisted that we eat our meals at Ricks College cafeteria. I understand the L.D.S. Church furnished the food there. I ate several meals while I was working in the vicinity of the Hibbard church. The bishop out there insisted that since the Soil Conservation Service personnel were working right there at the church, doing their damage reports, that we should eat there.
- B: Did you receive any assistance from the Red Cross or any other private or independent organizations?

- R: Yes, the Red Cross gave my wife quite a bit of cleaning supplies for cleaning our home; disinfectants and things of that nature. The Immanuel Lutheran Church at Twin Falls, which we used to be members, sent food and cleaning supplies and things of that nature to help us out.
- B: What government agency did you deal with during the recovery operation?
- R: I personally worked for the Soil Conservation Service in their capacity of taking care of the Bureau of Reclamation's demands.
- B: 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?
- R: No, I don't.
- B: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?
- R: No, I don't.
- B: Do you feel that the flood was a divine punishment or a man-made disaster?
- R: I think it was a man-made disaster.
- B: Why?
- R: Because man sometimes gets ahead of himself and thinks he's doing pretty well. He overlooks a minor point at some place in his considerations and that catches him up. In engineering work, minor points are not to be overlooked.
- B: Do you think a lot of minor points were overlooked on the Teton Dam?
- R: No, I don't think so. I think the Teton Dam, in itself, was a wonderful piece of construction. I think that consideration wasn't given to one minor point I mentioned or it wasn't given enough weight and that in turn took away the quality of the rest of the project.
- B: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt? If so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?

R: There have been a lot of appurtenances--irrigation systems, pipes, ditches, channels of all sorts--prepared for the water that they would have been saving through the winter by the Teton Dam. It's hard to say don't rebuild it, because all that money in development that's been expended so far. I think the Teton Dam should be rebuilt. Whether in the same place or not I don't feel qualified to say.

B: How has the Teton disaster changed your life?

R: It has taken a lot of time away from my family because I worked for the Soil Conservation Service and our mission has quite a large mission. We started out with the original cleanup. We went through helping people get their original damage reports done. We helped them in their property cleanup and channel cleanup of the rivers and things of that nature. We're still going on rejuvenation of the farmland at this point. I've just spent a lot of my own time in this thing. I've been well paid by the government; I have no gripes or anything like that and I've been glad to spend the time. It has changed my life in that it's taken a lot of time away from my family.

B: How do you think the Bureau of Reclamation treated the people?

R: I think the Bureau of Reclamation has been extremely fair. When you get to dealing with an organization as large as the Bureau of Reclamation or any other agency in the United States Government, you're going to find that once in a while you're going to have unhappy people. This seems to be inherent in government contact. I think that over-all, not knowing of every case, that the Bureau of Reclamation has been fair. I have been in meetings with their personnel and they are extending themselves greatly to be fair to the people.

B: What was the Soil Conservation's role in the recovery operation of the Teton flood?

R: Speaking as a private individual not as an employee of the Soil Conservation Service, this isn't to be considered an official statement from the Soil Conservation Service. The first thing we did was to try to get the equipment back into shape. We lost a lot of vehicles in the flood and we needed some equipment to get back on the road. We needed a place to operate from. We finally wound up operating from Tom Spofford's basement. This home is about a block and a half from the office. We set up a cleaning crew and got the office pretty well cleaned out and tried to get back in it as soon as possible. It took two weeks.

B: How many inches of water was in your office?

R: There was approximately seven feet of water before the front door broke open. I suspect a pickup or something hit the back door and knocked it open. The water filled the office and created quite a vortex in the individual rooms evidently because furniture was stacked high in the corners of the room. As I said before, "I lost a number of engineering texts, technical books and things of that nature." Everyone in the office experienced the same thing. We lost all of our personal references as well as the government documentation, our files, all of our forms, everything was lost that was in the office except for a few minor pieces of equipment.

B: How long did it take you to clean it up?

R: It was about two weeks before we got back into the office to begin the repairs. The floor in another section of the building had begun to settle and they thought that maybe this building might have been hurt to the point that it couldn't be salvaged. However, the settling quit. We tore the wallboard off and cleaned the mud that had gone in between the walls. All that had to be washed out. We had a minor flood we created ourselves just to get the mud out between the walls after we had thought we had the whole place clean.

We got some orientation from the Federal Disaster Administration. They gave us our mission to help the Bureau of Reclamation and then make out the emergency disaster reports. We set up an office in the fieldhouse at the college. We sent representatives to the various church wards. Two or three men would go out there with a stack of forms. Bishops or responsible people, in the area, would get the word around to the various people. They had to do this by contacting them personally because most of the phone systems were gone. People would come in to meet with the Soil Conservation Service personnel and make out their disaster reports in strictly a preliminary fashion. I feel this gave them something to grasp. They could see that people were trying to help them; the government was trying to help them and to try to get them going again.

We got a lot of reports done and we changed our procedure for a more in-depth report. We started evaluating these reports and laying out figures on what it was going to cost to clean this up, what it would cost to cleanup a particular type of debris as opposed to another type of debris, and where we were going to put it. We got organized to the point that we had contracts drawn up by private contractors for the debris cleanup. We supervised this cleanup. The contractors found that the best way to approach it was to use a small cat, a large front end loader, a backhoe, and several dump trucks on each crew with a couple of laborers. We had at one time something like 20 of these crews working in the area.

Fremont County had several crews. They were involved in the flood cleanup, but it was pretty well the districts bounded by county lines. The Federal Disaster Administration acted as if they expected us to adhere to those boundaries so we did. The office in Rigby, Idaho Falls, and Rexburg handled an awful lot of the flood work. That's all we did for

months. The St. Anthony office handled the lower end of the Fremont County that was flooded. Once this preliminary cleanup was taken care of we started getting it out of people's yards and out of their housing area.

We expanded and went out to the barns and the fields. This was done in different phases and we wound up with the last phase. We cleaned up most of the last of the debris except that along the rivers. This was let on another contract. This was necessitated because of the involvement of the Army Corps of Engineers. Their jurisdiction extends into the smaller waterways such as the Teton River. The Soil Conservation Service and other agencies arranged, through the U.S. Army, for the use of a Chinook helicopter for retrieving automobiles, tractors, pickups and various other hard debris that could be lifted. They had a 5 acre yard completely jammed full. It looked like an auto wrecking yard.

I don't know the costs, but they were very reasonable. The Army gave it to us for about a third of the operating cost of the unit, plus the crews. The hard debris removed by the helicopter was placed in a yard to the east of the Rexburg C-A-L- Ranch Store. This debris was left there as intact as possible for the purpose of identification and removal by the owners. What was left at the end of a given period would be baled and used for scrap. That was the original plan put forth by the county commissioners.

B: What activities are the Soil Conservation involved in now?

R: The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service has made money available under emergency programs for the replacement of irrigation systems, cleaning of irrigation systems, leveling of land, and gravel and silt removal on other farm land. Through the ASCS the farmers are getting funds at a pretty good rate to go ahead and fix their land back to the original shape

it was in if it was economically feasible. By that I mean, if it doesn't cost more than the land is worth. That's the way the program is supposed to work. The Soil Conservation Service is furnishing the technical assistance to the ASCS. Our technicians are doing the land leveling surveys, the designs, and all the engineering technical work for these practices. There is a lot of land leveling and a lot of ditches; many structures have been replaced and many are to be replaced; and this has been what we've been doing to date this year.

B: How many men did you bring in to help on this?

R: At one time there were approximately 30 men working out of the Rexburg field office. There were people from Colorado, Oregon, Washington, California, and Nevada. All the western states were very generous with their help. They sent people right in. Many people came from other parts of Idaho.

B: How does the ASC distribute their funds?

R: Their funding is broken down by state, federal level and then on. The State of Idaho has given them money for the counties involved and in turn each county has an ASC committee made up of the local farmers. They determine, by considering each applicant, who is eligible and who is not. Nearly all of the applicants applying for this emergency disaster money have been determined eligible. The Soil Conservation Service supplies the technical information to determine the eligibility. The farmers are required, once they have been determined eligible, to pay a percentage of the cost to the project. This cost, however, is being picked up by the Bureau of Reclamation under their claims system. This is because the Bureau of Reclamation has assumed responsibility for the flood and it's part of the expense caused by the flood.

B: Is there anything else you would like to add?

- R: Yes, there was one interesting thing. A friend of mine, Tom Spofford, and a deputy sheriff, Jeff Hill, were in a boat trying to get an elderly lady out of a house. They were swept downstream prior to getting to the house and both of them were nearly drowned. Luckily, the whole situation came out all right.
- B: Were they in a canoe?
- R: Yes.
- B: Where did they finally get out?
- R: About four to six blocks below where they got in downtown.
- B: What did you think about the Appreciation Day that was held in June?
- R: I think it was a good thing.
- B: Do you think it was a learning experience?
- R: Yes, I do. I've been through a pretty hectic range fire which traveled at rates that just surprised me to no end. I had been involved in forest fires before, but never anything like that. Now, I've been involved in a flood of this nature which I understand is quite a bit different from the floods that occur along the Mississippi and the larger rivers. I think I have learned that I don't want to be involved in any more of them. I also learned that you really can't stand out there and say people won't hold up; they won't stand up to it. I have seen elderly people that had to start all over again, I've seen young people that were just starting out, I've seen people loose everything they had--things that they had collected and held dear to them all of their lives--and still come back and smile and say, "I'm going to get started again just as soon as I can." That, in itself, is quite a learning experience.
- B: Do you have anything else that you would like to add?
- R: No, I think that's about it.
- B: Thank you, Mr. Remington.