

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Gerald Jay Lowe

Interviewed by

Mary Ann Beck

June 8, 1977

Project made possible by funds from the

W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Idaho State Legislature through the
Idaho State Historical Society and
National Endowment for the Humanities

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, GERALD LOWE, 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.

Gerald J. Lowe
Interviewee's Signature
6/8/77
Date

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information contained in the interview with GERALD J. LOUG, I, MARYANN RECK (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.

Maryann Beck
Interviewer's Signature

6/2/77
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Gerald Jay Lowe

INTERVIEWER: Mary Ann Beck

DATE: June 8, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

B: Where were you born?

L: Banida, Idaho.

B: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

L: Four years.

B: Would you spell your full name?

L: Gerald Jay Lowe.

B: How old are you?

L: Forty-two.

B: Do you have a family?

L: Yes.

B: How many were living at your home at the time of the flood?

L: Five.

B: What was your address at the time of the flood?

L: Route 1, Box 222.

B: What is your present address?

L: Route 1, Box 222.

B: What do you do for a living?

L: I'm a plumbing contractor and I have a farm that I rent.

B: How long have you lived in this area?

L: Four years.

B: Do you own your own home, farm and business?

L: Yes.

B: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?

- L: Yes, we felt like the dam would help us a lot here, especially on the river bottom. We could farm quite a bit more ground if we could control the flooding in the spring.
- B: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?
- L: No.
- B: Where were you and your family when the Teton Dam broke?
- L: My son and I were in Rexburg, my wife was on her way to Spokane with our youngest daughter and my next to the oldest daughter was here at home.
- B: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed? Did you try to save any personal belongings or household goods?
- L: We heard about the dam breaking a few minutes before twelve. Our first reaction was to come to the farm and get the cattle out of the river bottom. As we went by the home to get the cattle out, I told my daughter to get the car packed with the essentials and get ready to get out of the area.
- B: Did you see the flood coming?
- L: Yes.
- B: Will you describe it in detail?
- L: We watched the flood coming from our harvest stores that are on the place. They stand 60 feet tall. We climbed up on them and we could hear and see the flood coming as it started to get into the Burton area. When we realized it was coming, we got down and got a little closer. It hit some of our neighbors to the east of us. One trailer, the Seipert's, was moved off like a match box. When we realized what the flood was going to do, we tried to come back to our farm and save some of our sprinkler pipe.
- In the meantime, we had all our cattle in the corrals hoping that they were safe on high ground. We tried to save some of our sprinkler pipe. The sprinkler pipe that we saved was washed away anyway. As the flood moved

across the ground, there was dust in front of it. As it picked up momentum, it got deeper and deeper and started to move houses, roofs, and trailers. All kinds of debris went by.

We were on pretty high ground, so we thought that the cattle was safe in our corrals. When we realized that they weren't, we started loading the calves into the pickup and tried to get the cattle out. We had already planned a route to get these cattle to higher ground. We moved them out of the corrals and down the road toward Keith Wilcox's which was south. On the way down there the water came from behind Jim Jensen's home and around from our home and met. The water was so deep that we had to abandon trying to save the cattle. The water met there on the road between Jim Jensen's and Mason's and formed a lake.

An interesting thing that we might add, is that when my boy and two of Frank Kinghorn's boys were trying to get these cattle to higher ground farther south they realized that it was hopeless. They tried to come back to our farm. The cattle were floundering on the road washed up against the fence. A man in a helicopter, who we later found out was Sam Buckley, came and cut the fence. The cattle were able to get through and they washed down to high ground farther west. That saved most of the cattle. A lot of the younger ones were drowned. We didn't realize the water would get that high. We could have saved more of our cattle if we had brought them right straight east from our farm up on the high ground where the grain was. We thought we were going to save the grain as it was, but we didn't save anything. We could have saved more of the cattle if we would have run them up there.

At one point we were dry, the next thing there was water swirling all around us. We tried to save as many of our animals as we could. Wading

in the cold water they were washed up against the fences and the gates. We finally got all of them out that we could. We turned them loose and let them fend for themselves. The water was very cold. We waded around in it. It was up to my armpits, at one point. To give you some idea how cold the water was--I found a calf that was drowning and I pulled it over and tried to throw it up onto a spud piler. As I moved my knee under the calf to give it a boost up onto the piler, I got a cramp in my leg that you can't imagine. If anyone has ever had a cramp in their leg, they know how crippled it leaves you for awhile. This one leg was that way. I limped across the yard trying to get to some cattle that were washed up against the fence. There were four or five of them up against a gate in our corrals. As I moved across the yard, the water was probably four or five feet deep by then, there was a pile of twine that had been piled out. It was probably two feet high and I stumbled over the pile of twine. As I stumbled over it, I got a cramp in my other leg. I had to fight to keep my head above water. I just about went down. Finally, I got my leg underneath me again, but both legs hurt so bad they were hard to walk on.

I went over and got those cattle away from the fence. My boy and two of Frank's boys were there and they hollered to me. I said, "It's no good, we can't save anymore. You'd better come out of the water." We walked up to high ground and came up here to my house to see how the water was.

Before the water got high, we felt like our house would be all right. When we got up to our home, the water was starting to come through the basement. It had backed up through the septic tank, sewer, and had come up through the toilets. We started to clear things out of the basement. As we were packing meat from our deep freeze, wheat and furniture out of the basement, the water was coming in. I remember the last few pieces of meat

we got out of the deep freeze, the deep freeze was bobbing up and down and started to float. The basement didn't get too full because we were on high ground, but it got up to under the light switches.

Down at the farm, which was quite a bit lower, it was about four or five feet deep. The water was so muddy and thick that it gave you the creeps. It was like walking through a boggy corral. In fact, it was. As we walked through the corrals, the manure would float to the top. The water that was moving by was thick, like cream. It was brown, a dark dirty brown.

B: Do you think God was with you or would you have drowned in your corral?

L: I'm sure he was looking out for us. We were kind of foolish I guess. When I think back over it, I didn't see the danger then. As I think back over it now, and there were five of us here, my boy and two of Frank Kinghorn's boys, and Frank, we were lucky. Frank loaded some calves into the pickup and headed south. As he was going, the water hit him. It got so deep around the truck that it was up around the keyholes where you lock the door. The truck kept going and he got up on high ground. That was a miracle.

My boy and two of Frank's were taking the cattle down. The water caught up with them and they decided to get off their horses and try to come back to the house. They realized that was futile. They got back on the horses and came up on the road past Jim Jensen's old houses and corrals. The horses, a few times, had to swim against the current. We felt like it was a miracle that they made it back.

My boy got back here quick enough that the water hadn't gotten deep here yet. When he got back here, he left the horses out in the corrals so they could get free of the water. Another thing bothered him. He tried to get a calf over a fence, but it was so big he couldn't get it over. He had to stand and watch it drown. As I think back on it, I do think that the Lord

watched over us. We weren't very smart to stay, but I'd probably do it over again.

B: In vacating the area where you lived, tell what happened to you and your family.

L: We never left the area. My boy and I chose to stay. We felt like we could do more good here. My neighbors took my twelve-year-old daughter and went into Rexburg. As they were going to Rexburg on Highway 88, they stopped at the stoplight there and saw the water coming. They turned at the corner and went down the street from the hospital. They had to keep going south to avoid it until they got up onto high ground.

My wife was on her way to Spokane. She left early that morning with my youngest daughter. She didn't find out about the flood until that night. By then it was too late to find out if she had a family.

B: Did you see any animals trying to escape the floodwaters besides your own?

L: Yes.

B: Describe it.

L: We were watching the flood approaching and there was a black angus cow that was moving along ahead of the flood. She finally moved into our potato patch. The water was probably up to her belly. It hadn't started to float her yet. We coaxed her over and got her into our corrals. I didn't see any other animals close enough that we could tell.

We did see some animals floating along. One cow looked like she was on top of a roof or something. She was stading on the roof and the water bounced her along. I suppose she finally got in some trees and tipped over. I am sure she drowned.

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

L: Yes, I mentioned some of them. We felt like, as we look back on it, someone could have been drowned very easily. In fact, the people on the hill,

the butte, that were watching told Frank Kinghorn's wife that they saw her two sons drown. In fact, they didn't drown. They got on their horses and came back to the house. That's how close it was.

B: Where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood?

L: There were five of us that elected to stay after the flood and after the water had receded. We realized that we could do no more. We launched a canoe that we had put here on our patio. We got in the canoe and rode straight south across through Jim Jensen's field, across the highway, to high ground where Frank Kinghorn was. He was worried. He was up there with a pickup load of calves. He was glad to see his boys. We picked Frank Kinghorn up in the canoe and brought him back to the house.

Later on, when the water went down, we drove up what was left of the road to Burton's Corner. We looked at what the flood had done: Herman Waltz's house wasn't there, houses were on the road tipped and toppled, trailers all over.

By then it was dark. We came back to the house. We had lots of things to eat. My wife had made sandwiches for us to eat while she was gone to Spokane. They were all up here on the bedroom floor where we put them after pulling them out of the freezer. We had frozen orange juice that we had to drink by the gallons. We sat around there, five of us, by candlelight, and talked and reminisced about the things that had happened. Frankly, we had a good time. We were all kind of punchy. We laughed and giggled like a bunch of little kids. We slept here, all five of us, that night. The next morning we got up to look around to see if there was anything green at all in the area.

B: Did you continue to stay in your home?

L: Yes, we never moved out. I finally got word to my wife, Sunday, that we were all right. Tuesday, she jumped on a plane from Spokane and came down. We continued to clean mud and muck. The upstairs of our home we never moved out of it.

B: What was the damage suffered as a result of the flood? What was the most cherished item you lost in the flood?

L: I suppose the most cherished thing that I lost, as far as I was concerned, was the damage it did to the land. It bothered me more than anything. I love this place so much and when we went down in the back and saw how it had washed the top soil off, washed big holes and deposited gravel here and there and muck and silt, I thought there would be no hope that we would have any land left down in the lower part of the farm.

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

L: I suppose we didn't have time to think too much only about saving the animals. We didn't realize the full extent of it until the next day. By then, I think, we were kind of numb. It was hard for me to imagine it. We never figured that it would ever get that high or it would never do that much to the homes down on the farm. The next day, when we realized what a problem we had and what damage it had done to us, we were shocked.

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

L: We first started by pumping the basements and getting the water out. One of the problems we had was our milk cows. We only had 32 milk cows, but our barn was gone. Compressors, milking machines, vacuum pumps, everything was gone or full of water. We had to milk cows. We milked 32 cows by hand. We finally got our cows moved over to one of our neighbors, Dwight Spaulding, so we could get the milking regulated and on time.

We started on the homes first, cleaning the basements out, tearing down walls, and then started on the barns to see if we could get that back in order.

B: Did you do any scraping in the fall?

L: Later that summer we had Persimeroi Construction Company come in. They told us that they could straighten up our land, thirty acres of it, down in the back. We had a small hill and they scraped the hill, filled in the holes, and leveled it up. It looks a lot better now than I ever thought it would.

B: Did the government help you on that?

L: Yes, the government helped us. The ASC Office paid eighty percent of the scraping. We're hopeful that we'll get the other twenty percent from the Bureau.

B: What was some of the problems that gave you the most frustration?

L: First of all, the cleaning. We went up to the Hart Gym and tried to decide what we should do. I felt like we were herded around like cattle up there. They didn't know what they were doing. They were just trying to satisfy us. As I look back on it now, the lines we stood in, to get our forms and papers and names signed in, was all a waste of time. They didn't know what they were doing and we didn't either. We were all trying to kill time I guess,

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

L: Yes, we had a lot of help and we're so grateful to so many people. As many people have said, "Thousands of people came into the area. We would be so discouraged from all the work. We were tired and it looked like a mountain of muck. We thought we would never get it done. Here would come a crew of people and they would do as much work in a day as it would take us a week. That would boost our morale and then we could go on." These people will never know how much they helped us in this area.

- B: Did you receive assistance from the LDS Church groups? Did you receive any other assistance from any other groups?
- L: We never had anyone but LDS people come to our farm, but I know that there was a lot of other groups in the area doing as much as the LDS people were.
- B: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experiences connected with the flood or cleanup operations?
- L: They'd come in and boost our morale and help us. It was amazing to see how everybody pitched in and got together helping out others. I think one of the amazing things that I saw, and this is kind of a personal thing, but we had one of the HUD people come out to our area and wanted the bishop to go with him. They wanted to visit a few homes and see if they qualified for HUD trailers. The bishop wasn't able to go and called me and asked me if I would go with them. As we went around to these homes, this maid said, "I can't believe it. I have been on a lot of these disasters all over the world. I've never been in one where people were trying so hard to help themselves. We come into a home all cleaned up. It might have been broken down, falling apart, but its clean. These people haven't been sitting around waiting for us to come help them."
- B: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?
- L: Not that we know of.
- B: What kind of government aid did you receive, if any, after the flood?
- L: We didn't receive any government aid immediately after. I went up and got a couple pair of boots from the church welfare center.
- B: Did HUD come in and help?
- L: HUD brought two trailers down for one big family that was living on our farm. They were working for us at the time. They set up those two trailers and the people lived in those trailers until Christmas time.

B: Did you receive any assistance from the Red Cross or other private organizations?

L: I think my wife got some cleaning materials and this sort of thing from the Red Cross. They also gave us money for gas to go to and from work.

B: Did you go up to the bishop's storehouse?

L: We got a few things from there; boots, shoes. We had most of our things here. We were lucky.

B: Did you go up to the Manwaring Center to eat your dinners?

L: No.

B: What government agency did you deal with during the recovery operations?

L: We finally got a loan approved from SBA to help us get our finances together to get our machinery, barn and homes back in condition. The ASC office helped fix our fences, ditches and level our land.

B: Did Soil Conservation bring men in to cleanup the debris?

L: Yes, we had two or three different crews in here cleaning up the debris around on the farm. Also, down in the back where the debris had piled up around the trees and willows along the river bank.

B: Do you feel that those helping in the recovery operations took advantage of you or the government, especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it?

L: No, we felt like most people were fair with us and the government. They scraped the land as they cleaned the debris, did many sundry things they were called on to do and fences were fixed better than they were before.

B: Who fixed the fences? Did you bring men in to do it?

L: Yes, we had crews come in and fix our fences.

B: Did you have any dealings with state, county authorities or officers during the flood?

L: No.

B: Without divulging any names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent claims?

L: No.

B: Do you feel that the flood was a divine punishment or a man-made disaster?

L: No.

B: Will you explain?

L: I feel like it was a man-made disaster. The Lord doesn't punish us that way.

B: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt?

L: I think eventually it should be. We sure need that storage water,

B: Should it be rebuilt in the same place?

L: I wouldn't know about that. I'm sure they'll check into that again. The next time they will be more thorough than they were this time.

B: How has the Teton Dam disaster changed your life?

L: It has got me kind of cranky in a lot of ways. I've been on edge so much through this time period the last year or so. It has made us realize how important the family is to each other as we are part of. We realized that the family was the most important thing. When we found out that everyone of our family was all right, we can take anything.

B: What did you think about the Appreciation Day that was held in June for the volunteers?

L: I suppose I didn't want to be reminded of it. I felt like we appreciated these people very much and should show some appreciation to them. I didn't want to be reminded of the flood however.

B: Do you think this was a good learning experience?

L: It sure was a good learning experience. I suppose we've learned that sometimes it takes too much red tape to come and get things out as far as the government is concerned. They tried to help us, but were so bogged down

with bureaucracy and red tape that sometimes it wasn't too efficient. We found out who our friends were, who we could depend on, and who our neighbors were. We appreciated this. We found out a lot about ourselves through the last year.

B: Do you think it was a good missionary tool?

L: I really think it was. This man I told you about that I went around with from HUD, later on said to me, "I told the stake president I've never seen people like this. You people must have something. When I get back to Kansas City, I want to see the missionaries." I'm sure there were many stories like this.

B: How do you think the people reacted overall?

L: I think it brought people closer together. They really worked together. They could see they all had a common cause. Now with us in our area here, geographical area of the ward, exactly fifty percent of the homes were damaged and the other fifty percent were untouched. The fact that other person's homes weren't touched didn't mean that he was untouched. His family and friends came over and helped us on this side.

That Sunday morning we got up early and tried to evaluate what we had. I went towards the Burton School to look to see if we could find a place to take our cows and milk. The water was high along the roads. I rode my motorcycle part way down until the water got too deep and I had to walk. I climbed over logs, wire and debris in the road before we got to the Burton School. Finally, the water cleared up and I saw something green. I was never so happy in my life when I saw people coming the other way. We hugged each other and embraced each other. It was a happy time to see someone that didn't look like a drowned rat. As we went on through, people started cleaning up. Everybody was concerned about everybody else.

We met at church and if you didn't have a fancy suit on it didn't matter. We had the spirit and that was the important thing. People really pulled together and I think that was the true test. The Lord probably was watching us close. I hope we came through in flying colors.

There was a lot of people who really felt close to each other who probably hadn't before. Everybody was concerned about everybody else. Do you have enough to eat? Families were taking other families in. We surely appreciated having the college there to take our families in. HUD came in and put these trailers up for us.

One thing really pleased me and that was the way services came in. The Red Cross and the church helped. What really made me proud of our church was the way the welfare came in and set up quick to take care of everyone. It didn't matter whether they belonged to our church or not. It goes to show you that we are all God's children and our church was organized and ready to take care of any disaster or any emergency that came along. I was proud to be a member of it.

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

L: One thing I would like to say concerning this whole situation is, the time it has taken to get our claim together and get it in, I think I would sooner take the mud and the muck again than I would all the paperwork and heartache that we had trying to get that thing together. We tried so hard to make it honest and fair and only get what we had coming. If there were any mistakes made, they were innocent mistakes that we made. This has probably been one of the most frustrating years that I ever had.

B: Thank you very much, Mr. Lowe.