

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

William Henry Rogers

Interviewed by

Mary Ann Beck

June 22, 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

WILLIAM H. ROGERS<sup>SR</sup>, MARYANN BECK  
(name, please print) (interviewer, print)

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Maryann Beck  
Interviewer's Signature

6/22/77  
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, William H Rogers, do hereby assign full  
(please print full name)  
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William H Rogers  
Interviewee's Signature

6-22-77

Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: William Henry Rogers

INTERVIEWER: Mary Ann Beck

DATE: June 22, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

B: Please spell you full name.

R: William Henry Rogers.

B: Where were you born?

R: Farnum, Idaho, 10 miles south of Ashton.

B: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

R: Eight years.

B: How old are you?

R: 52.

B: What do you do for a living?

R: I'm an instructor at Ricks College.

B: Do you have a family?

R: Yes, eight children.

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

R: Six of the children were with us.

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

R: 261 East Main, Rexburg.

B: What is your present address?

R: 261 East Main, Rexburg.

B: Did you own your own home?

R: We were buying it.

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

R: I supported it because of irrigation.

B: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?

R: My wife had the thought a year ago that if the dam was bombed or did break loose it would be quite a catastrophe.

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

R: I couldn't believe it.

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

R: Yes, we took a number of items upstairs. My wife grabbed the good, nice clothes that we had. They were in the basement and on the main floor and she took them upstairs to the third floor. She started packing up the wheat on the second floor. She started packing up others things and putting them up higher.

B: Did you see the flood coming?

R: Yes, I saw the floodwaters. As a matter of fact, the state patrolman came down for the last time and said, "The water is in the east end of Rexburg." We knew it was time to get out so we got in both the vehicles and drove up on the hill. When we were two or three blocks on the hill, I parked the car and went running to where I could watch the water come through Smith Park.

B: Would you like to describe this?

R: There was dust coming ahead of the water and then there was a little water trickling down at first. Pretty soon there was a wall of water coming about three or four feet high. You couldn't see the water; all you could see was debris, logs, and straw. It was so dirty it kept getting higher and higher. You could hear the stuff crashing into the trees as it came down through Smith Park.

B: How did it make the turn by the hospital?

R: It was quite a swift current as it came down through Main Street from off Smith Park. It had to come around there in order to get past some of the houses and it was very swift. As a matter of fact, we saw a kayak with two people in it come down through on Third East and then hit Main Street. They tried to turn

the kayak around and come back up against the current, but they couldn't make any headway. They floated right on down Main Street so I don't know what became of them.

B: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed, what preparation did you take to save your property?

R: I took a shovel and started to dam up around the basement windows. I put up plastic and plyboard.

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

R: After we saw the water come in, we realized we wouldn't have a place to stay so we made preparations to go and stay in the Automotive Lab. I had an office up there where two of the children did sleep that night.

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

R: After the water had receded to about two feet, it was still swift. My son and I waded into the property to make an investigation of the damage. In back of our property our canoe was still up on the rack. It was just barely above the water, so we pulled the canoe out, grabbed the two paddles and floated out our driveway down Main Street. We went up Second East and then back down Second East to Main Street. I was tired of paddling so I got out and waded back two-thirds of a block back to the house. My son went on down Main Street in the red canoe.

B: How were the conditions when you paddled by?

R: It was a terrible sight to see. There were logs and debris piled up twelve feet high on the east side of the buildings on Second End against the service stations, the offices, and the post office.

B: Did you see animals trying to escape the floodwaters?

R: Yes, I saw two animals come out. One was a hereford cow and she was floundering. She came out on Third East on Main Street and staggered as if she had given in.

A little later there was a holstein cow and it come out the same way, staggering. This holstein cow went up to the side of a house and stood there for hours.

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

R: Our division supervisor, Robert Todd, at the Industrial Arts Science Building took us to his home on the hill.

B: Did you continue to stay there during the cleanup?

R: No, the second day after the flood my brother-in-law brought in a camper trailer from my wife's folks at Shelley, Idaho. This is where we slept and ate. Later on we ate at the Ricks College cafeteria and at the stake house.

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

R: We waded in that night, after the water was about two feet, and made an inspection of the property.

B: What was your first reaction when you viewed the destruction of your property?

R: What a lot of work to reclaim it.

B: What was the damage you suffered as a result of the flood?

R: The property damage was to some of the material things. The house was cleaned out, salvaged and dried. We started that Sunday morning. I realized what had to be done, because of my construction work experience, to keep my floors from warping. We tore all the appliances and furniture out of the main floor and then we tore the rugs and linoleum in order to get the air into the floor so it wouldn't warp.

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

R: The most cherished item was several hundred pages of my life history that I'd been accumulating over the years.

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

R: To me it wasn't as bad as floundering in the dark for spirituality. For years I'd done this when I was 24 or 25 years old. I always desired to follow something righteous, but I didn't belong to any religion. I was discouraged and ready to take my life. That was far more devastating than the flood was.

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

R: Lots of physical work. We threw, dragged or hauled everything out of the house. We used my furniture cart that I had made previously. We took all the appliances out, our furniture and put it out on the outside of the house. The main thing was to clear the house out to save it.

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

R: One was a slippery rope that was full of mud. Every time you tried to tie furniture to the furniture cart it would slip off. Another problem was the work. It was muddy, tromping through the mud upstairs or downstairs. We had to bucket the water out or bucket the mud out, shovel it up, fill the buckets and then pack it out by hand, dump it out either in the gutter or out in the street or out in the back lot. Later, loaders would pick this up. Tons and tons of this had to be taken out. There were eight or ten inches of mud taken out of the basement. I had a root cellar that had to be cleaned out.

B: How much water was in your home?

R: There was six feet of water around the house and close to two feet of water on the main floor.

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

R: This was what gave us vital life. People came in from all over the area--north, south, east, west--especially south from Utah. There were people coming in here by the hundreds and thousands to help us in the area here.

We had as high as four or five people helping us on some days; both ladies and men. The ladies did the lighter work; the men did the heavier work.

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

R: The only thing that I had that was spiritual was the attitude of the people that came in and helped. One day four people came in from Plymouth, Utah. They had a sense of humor that it was more like play than work when we were packing the mud out of the root cellar. Two of them were assigned there while the other two came out and helped pack mud out of the basement and garage.

B: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

R: No, I didn't see any of it myself.

B: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

R: I didn't receive any government aid immediately after the flood outside of some meals up at Ricks College.

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

R: We ate at the cafeteria or over at the stake center when they got it organized and then spent our time cleaning. I received some assistance, financial and physical, from some of my relatives.

B: Did you receive any assistance from the LDS or other church groups immediately after the flood?

R: Yes, the LDS people came in from the outlying communities and helped us. They gave us the actual physical help that we needed in order to clean-up.

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

R: As soon as it was available, I went into the Housing and Urban Development office to make application for furniture to go back in the house. This came through the 8th of July and we were back in the house using it.

- B: Did you have any dealings with the state and county authorities in law enforcement during the flood?
- R: Government officials came in and made a survey of what we needed. They asked us questions and we made application on the size of our family and what we needed. They brought us beds, bedding, refrigerator, stove, sofa, overstuffed chair and a kitchen unit for the dishes and spoons.
- 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: Personally, I can't say that because I haven't talked to others. I was too busy caring for my own needs. I wanted just what was necessary for me to help me out. I've heard rumors, but I won't pass them because you can't count on them.
- B: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?
- R: I haven't even wanted to know.
- B: Do you feel that the flood was a divine punishment or a man-made disaster?
- R: It was a man-made disaster by faulty design of the dam. We have to suffer the consequences and hope that we get blessings from the experience.
- B: Do you think it was a good learning experience?
- R: Yes, it was. We put our values in a more proper place than they were before; less value on material things.
- B: Do you think that the dam should be rebuilt? If so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?
- R: From year to year we have been bothered with flooding of the Teton River because of the high water runoff on the Teton range mountains. If they are going to build the dam on porous material again I would not be in favor of having the dam built because of possible failure in the future.

B: How has the Teton disaster changed your life?

R: I've put more value on spiritual things; things that I can take with me when I pass from this life. I've put less value on material things.

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

R: Yes, in many ways it was because of the stake president. The way the stake president operated and the people, the LDS Church brought in welfare supplies. It showed the government how quick LDS people can work and the way we worked together to bounce back to clean the community.

B: Do you think this was a dry run for something bigger in our lives?

R: I think any experience that we have in life can be a preparation for something greater or something more severe. We learn strength to help us overcome.

B: Do you want to tell us about your family being on the front page of the Ensign?

R: One day I was in my office, up at school, and I received a call asking permission for pictures to be taken of my living room. I didn't realize what they were going to do, but I said, "Yes, I'd be willing." I made an appointment with them. I came to find out that it was Elder Linschoten, the main church photographer, that goes around with President Kimball. He spent an hour in our living room rearranging furniture and taking 40-60 snapshots. We even borrowed one or two pieces of furniture from our neighbors and they were on the bare floor in the living room. It was dried out then and we were using it. That dry floor was awfully hard to keep clean. Brother Linschoten told us at the time, "These pictures will be submitted to a selection committee in Salt Lake City and if they are selected, one will go on the front page of the Ensign." We were held in suspense for some time until we were notified that it was going to go on the front page. We have heard comments from all over the world on that picture.

B: Then you are world famous now?

R: Yes, we have had missionaries or former students on missions in Germany and Switzerland that saw it over there. There have been missionaries over in Japan that have seen it there.

B: How did they get your family name?

R: They took down the names of the members of our family at the time they took the picture.

B: Did they get your name through the stake presidency?

R: Dan Hess escorted Brother Linschoten down here. He is a friend I've been acquainted with since high school.

B: What did you think about Appreciation Day?

R: I thought it was nice on Appreciation Day to give invitations to others to come in and be in our homes. I put my name in, but I guess I put it in a little late because they already had the people that applied spread out to other homes. On that particular day I was gone, so I don't know what took place. I'm sure, however, that many people appreciate what went on that day.

B: Do you have anything else you would like to add?

R: I kept a diary. Sometimes I would forget to write in it, but I kept it pretty regularly. One thing I might mention is watching the water on the east end of Main Street. I put a rock on the edge of the water and then watched the water going up or down. If it moved up, we'd move the rock up a little ways and watch it come up. When it quit, we got up to the edge of the rock and could see the water start receding. There was hope when the water started receding. You could look down Main Street and see the dirty mirky water. It was quite swift down through Main Street and things were being wiped out. I can't imagine what that water did going through some of those businesses. After the water went down, we viewed the damage.

As I came into my house and looked in the basement, it was as if you'd taken a lot of debris and straw and shook it up in a milk shaker. Our freezer was almost up in the kitchen from the basement. There was a refrigerator washed downstairs into the root cellar. My piano and rolltop desk were on their backs. It was just a topsy turvy mess with debris and straw hanging from the 2 x 8's in the floor joists in the basement. It was a dreary looking mess.

To clean the house we had to come in and take everything out. We used water to clean the kitchen floor, the living room and dining room floors. We had water in the faucets so we had a water supply that was good. We grabbed the squeegees and started washing the floors after we got everything cleared off the floor. When we started on the lath and plaster, there was an inch or two of mud on the main floor.

In the basement, there were eight or ten inches of mud that we had to bucket out. After the mud had settled and a day or two later there was a live pig that came in and settled in the back part of our lot. He decided to live there. Close to a week or better the owner came over and we cornered the pig. We put a rope on his leg and then we pulled him out to the trailer and loaded him so Hazen Muir could take him away. In the meantime, he was squealing like a stuck hog and my kids thought that was funny because they had never heard a hog squeal before.

Saturday night, the church moved in and started moving in welfare supplies from Salt Lake. The first plan was to use our south automotive lab, which will park 13 to 15 cars for doing lab work, and clear it out to use as a morgue. We were prepared for several hundred bodies to come in. It turned out that it was only used for 2 or 3 bodies. After that it was cleared out and the church used it for the bishop's storehouse. They brought a forklift into the south lab for the bishop's storehouse and piled stuff as high as they

could get it. It was as high as 8-12 feet in there with the materials they had. They had mattresses, beds, all kinds of canned goods, shovels, rakes and wheelbarrows. They had anything that a family could use. They had that stored in there and to get some of it you had to go through the bishop's order. /

The businesses downtown, after the water had receded, was frightening and discouraging to view it. When the water went in it collapsed these floors and it would take months and months to get their businesses back in shape.

We viewed the damage outside of town. We drove, the next day or two, up to Sugar City and could see farm equipment all over. There were tractors, combines, potatoe combines, grain bins and even houses scattered down through the fields. Parts of the road were out and it was difficult to get around. It was discouraging to see all this damage. Down west of town, out towards Mud Lake, the road was blocked by trailer houses and houses. When the water receded, these houses settled down in the roads as well as in the canals and in the fields. Over in the northwest section of town, there were logs from the sawmill that came down and ramed a good share of the homes. They were completely taken out. Out north of town there was a trailer court with 38 to 40 trailers completely wiped out. Big chunks of asphalt were taken over and deposited in a field. Further up in Sugar City, there was a section of railroad of several hundred feet, over in the fields and disconnected. The rail was twisted with the railroad ties on it.

There were busloads of help soon organized to come in to help. They came in every day of the week except Sunday. The government wanted to work Sunday, but President Sonderegger and the stake authorities insisted that there be no work done on Sunday with government help. This was an eye opener for the government. If it wasn't for the busloads of help that came in, it would been more discouraging trying to get the mud out. This was a

physical help and it also raised our morale; to keep our spirits up to keep working.

There was other church groups that came in like the Baptists, Presbyterians and the Mennonites. I understand that the Mennonites wouldn't help anybody under 65 years of age or younger. They helped the older people and they would stick with them until they had their houses clean. For example, Sister Potter lived next door to us. The Mennonites stayed right there with her until she had her house completely stripped, including the basement, and upstairs where it would dry out.

The government officials made a view of the damage and witnessed the damages. President Eyring came around with one or two of the faculty members to make a recording of the damages of certain houses and record it. They did this to my house going around each corner and looking at the minor cracks that were appearing. There had to be decisions made on demolition of houses and removing them. After the decision was made, there were big red numbers painted on the houses. For Sugar City, it was S for the number and for Madison County it was M with a number. You could watch these numbers decrease or increase from number 1 to 300. You realized these homes would eventually go out. These houses were bid on my different demolition crews. The demolition crews would come with a tractor with a big bucket on it. Within 20 or 25 minutes they could have a house completely flattened out and demolished. Within two or three hours the whole house would be hauled out to the dump. They started dumping this debris three or four miles southeast of Rexburg on a dryfarm in a big hollow. Later, they made a decision to start filling the gravel pit over in the northeast section of town.

The long drudgery of hours that it took to renew the homes had taken an effect on many people. There have been a few heart attacks. I was talking

to a bishop out at Wilford. He says the spirit of the ward has really deteriorated. The Relief Society's been working with the people. The help that came from outside kept us alive. I know my physical vitality isn't what it was a year ago. Hours and hours of work on something like this is very discouraging. It takes something out of every individual. I'm sure I'm not alone because I've talked to other individuals on this. There were a few things that kept us moving and that was the gospel of Jesus Christ. It gave us a testimony of the gospel and we knew that things would look up.

By the 21st of January, we got new rugs in the living room, dining room, and new linoleum in the kitchen. We had some mopboard replaced in these rooms so we could have better comfort and our basement will have to be finished later. I'm doing my own work. A lot of others are having it done and they are running into trouble because there have been so many contractors move in with shysters taking advantage of some of the people. They ask for a deposit and after they get a few deposits they vacate the area.

We can salvage some equipment. I did salvage my truck. My two boys and I went in before Christmas and took the truck engine apart, the differential, the wheel bearings, the transmission and dash. We washed these six times in hot soap and water. We high pressure cleaned them and did this six times. We put new parts back in the engine and got it running nicely, but the dash was a real problem. We still have problems with that. The mud and silt got in everything. Even though it was sealed it's still in there. It got in back of the plaster and was devastating. If you're trying to rebuild an engine, it's wise to get the new equipment because it takes too much time and energy to repair it.

The flood put our values in the right place. I believe we should put more value on spiritual things instead of material things because these

things can be wiped out overnight. When we first started cleaning up the house, I was fearful my children would take a negative attitude. However, they sensed the obligation and pitched in and we worked together. We had to use overshoes. When we used street shoes, they would get muddy and we would have mud clear up to our hips and even up to our shoulders when we were bucketing mud out. Even the girls got together and worked. We took our two little boys out for a week, but we brought them back and had them with us. I think this was good for them even though they were in the mud. Being right here gave our bodies time to adjust to the circumstances here.

It was cool two or three weeks after the flood. This was a great help in not having much bacteria and sickness in the town. We had electricity back in the home about three weeks later. We had water, but they told us not to use it until it had been tested for drinking. Three or four weeks later we actually drank the water with complete safety. It was thrilling to me to see how the children pitched in and cooperated. They even grabbed a shovel and helped shovel mud. They helped pack the mud out in buckets and were putting in as much effort as we were trying to get this cleaned up. Relatives came in and helped us also.

I might mention about the clothes. They used the south ballroom of the Kirkham Auditorium to store clothes and use as a distributing center for people trying to get clothes. We went up and got what clothes we needed. They eventually had more clothes than they could handle so they sent some clothes to the Deseret Industries in Idaho Falls. There were so many sent down that some of them were wasted and taken out and dumped in the dump west of Rexburg. They had too many clothes. People from all over the western states were sending clothes. It was nice for us because we could go there and get practically new clothes. A lot of it was used, but there were new

clothes that we could pick out that would fit us. We are still using some of these clothes today. People from all over the United States sent clothes in.

My brother-in-law brought in water. That was one of the main things he brought when he brought a bunch of stuff that was donated from a little ward at Howe, Idaho. He brought bed springs, mattresses, canned fruit and some honey to help tide us over until we could get some other supplies. The telephone was out for two or three weeks and the relatives were trying to get hold of us and wondered how we were getting along. We finally got word to them.

The LDS Church is liberal when it comes to assisting people. All during last summer after the flood and recovery, people could go up there and get food supplies out of the Manwaring Center with no questions asked. You'd go up and tell them what you needed and they'd hand it to you. No one asked whether we were victims of the flood or not. I felt free to go up and get food because I've been paying tithing ever since I joined the church 27 years ago. I've been paying my fast offering. This has been good insurance for me. This is the first time I've made use of the fast offering and received help from the LDS Church.

B: How did the Bureau of Reclamation treat you?

R: The Bureau of Reclamation gave us information on how to make application to get assistance. It was a lot of rigmarole to me, but that's the way the government works. I finally got my claim sent in September. In October, I received my payment. They wanted to shortchange you on some things. I decided to accept the claim as it was even though they shortchanged me on a few things. I came to value money as a medium of exchange, but I'd rather be on the short side when it comes to judgment day. This money that we're getting for assistance is coming from other taxpayers and they have to carry the burden too.

I think it's marvelous how these service utilities came in and tried to get the service back in. The telephone company came in and tried to do the best they could. It was some time before we got a telephone, but the electricity came back on within a couple of weeks after the flood. I used electricity principally to run two big fans to dry the home out which helped to keep the boards from warping. Utah Power and Light brought in extra crews from all over the Intermountain area. These people had to go back, out of the city, in order to live. Many of these people came in and helped every day. They brought their own lunch. One group brought an extra lunch so we could sit down and eat their lunch with them.

We had to have permits to go in and out. Later on, there was some stuff being stolen and transported out so you had to go up to the Reserve Station, Army Reserve, and get permits in order to transport things out and to bring things in. During the first few weeks, there was security on the downtown business. After ten o'clock they wouldn't let you in. You had to have a permit to go in there. You had no excuse going in there after ten o'clock at night. It was one dreary sight to look down Main Street and not see a light on.

The silt had been dumped with the water. People are having trouble irrigating. The soil dried out over the winter and the water permeates so fast the farmer is having trouble irrigating. It is hard to cover his fields with sufficient water. We have been warned about having a short supply of water this year because of the low snowfall in the mountains. We are trying to have a little garden in the backyard. I realize that the silt that's been dumped has no fertility whatsoever in it so it's going to take some fertilizer, in order to get our garden back to where it was. I've

