

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Eldon C. Hart

Interviewed by

Christina Sorensen

July 26, 1977

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY & RICKS COLLEGE
HISTORY DEPARTMENTS
COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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Christina C. Johnson
Interviewer's Signature

26 July 1977
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COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

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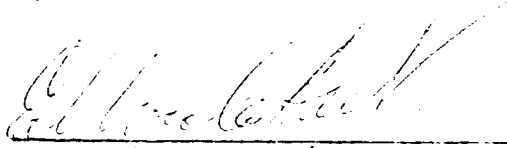
INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

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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Interviewee's Signature
July 26 1977

Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Eldon C. Hart

INTERVIEWER: Christina Sorensen

DATE: July 26, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

S: Would you please spell your name Mr. Hart?

H: Eldon Charles Hart.

S: Thank you. Mr. Hart, how old are you?

H: Sixty-two.

S: And where were you born?

H: In Plain City, Utah.

S: How long have you been a resident of Rexburg?

H: Well, except the four years I was on leave from 1960 to 1964 I came to Rexburg on the 5th of August 1940.

S: And at the time of the flood did you own your own home here?

H: Right.

S: And do you have a family?

H: Yes, we have four children, two boys and two girls, one of the boys is deceased.

S: Were any of your children living at your home at the time of the flood?

H: No. They were married and had families of their own. Two of them live in this area and the other one lives in Afton, Wyoming, the other family and the fourth one lives near Ogden.

S: And how are you employed?

H: I've held various positions at Ricks College since I came to Ricks college in 1940, both instructional in the variety of facets, subjects and so forth. Currently, I am Director of auxiliary services.

S: Now, on the day that the flood occurred, do you recall where you were when you first heard the news and what your initial reaction was?

H: Very vividly. It was on a Saturday, of course, and Saturday was my day off. I was at the airport. Usually we don't listen to the radio but this particular day we happened to have it on and one of my instructors, Craig Frisbee, was getting ready to go to a service school in Wichita and he had some problems with his car and so we had his car in the shop and we were putting some hydraulic lifters in it for him. We had them out ready to go back in. It was about 11:30 or thereabouts, when the news came on and said it appeared that there is a leak in the Teton Dam. So my son, Lewis, who was one of our flight instructors, and Craig immediately said we'd better get in the airplane and find out what's going on. So they immediately got in the airplane and went up over the dam. By the time they got there, of course, it was leaking very badly. They were there when the dam actually broke. They gave a very vivid report of actually what was happening. Of course, we had communication with the airplane, a radio. I wish I had had a tape recorder to have recorded it and kept it because the description that my son gave of what was happening as the water went around this curve and went around the other curve and how high the water was over the banks and what was happening. He requested that I get a hold of the local people and tell them what was happening. It was a wall of water, he said, the wall of water appears to be 125 feet high as it broke initially. He described it after it started in the plain as about 35-40 feet high. Of course, he tried to get people out of the canyon, they flew up and down the canyon trying to get people out and there were two fishermen that were there and they couldn't get them out. They shouted out over the aircraft engine and tried to get them out and all they did was wave at him. So he couldn't get them out and so he flew up and down the valley. Then he saw some people that were stranded as the water came out and spread over the valley. Of course, people had come from both directions and there was a small hill and he described the hill. I haven't actually been up

there to find out which one it was, but he described a small hill and he said there was a small place out of the water and there were people stranded on it. So he called me on the radio and said see what you can do about helicopters and let me know. We did have one helicopter that was stationed on the field. We had two of them but we had nobody to fly them. There was one down in the hanger down about three hangers and I went down to see if his was flyable. He had the tail rotor off and so he couldn't go. I told him the dam had broken and he had better get it out of there. So I called Idaho Falls and there weren't any helicopters available, so I called Lewis back on the radio and I said how many people are involved and he said oh it looks like to me maybe eight or nine. I said is there anything we could get in there with. He said, "Well, why don't you fill the front tanks of the N38." This is a registration number of a Deltavill and Beaver that we had, which is a very short field, short take-off and landing aircraft. He said, "Fill just the front tanks and it looks like maybe there is 500 feet and maybe I can make it." So Lewis came back and got out of the airplane and a representative of the sheriff's office went up in the airplane. As I remember the sheriff had a bullhorn so they could notify people of the dam break. One of our students went with a representative of the sheriff's office to warn the people, to go up and down the valley to warn people to move out.

We had no radio communications with this Beaver. So I had done as he had instructed and there were about 35 gallons of gasoline in the front tank which I installed. He took off alone and afterwards we found out that there was thirty-three people that he had picked up off of this barley field and transported them to St. Anthony. And the last words he said when he left was, "I'll get these people out and then I'll come back and help you move the airplanes." Well, of course, he never came back and what happened I found out later it he ran out of gas so he glided the airplane (Beaver)

over on the dry farms on the south side of the river and landed it on the dry farms.

S: What did you do then at the airport as far as making preparations?

H: Well, the thing that he was concerned with before he left was to get his wife and family out. As he described it on the radio before he came back to get the Beaver he said, "It's a tidal wave, it's taking everything in its path: barns, houses, trees, there isn't anything that it isn't taking." So he said, "Whatever you do, get the families out." So his wife came out in the car and I suggested to her that she get her family and move up on the hill. Then we had one of our students, I suggested to him that he drive our refueling trucks, our pickup, and then my wife came out to see if she could help. So we had them drive these various vehicles up to the college and parked them on the hill. So I stayed by the radio and, of course, was waiting for Lewis to return. I could see after awhile that he wasn't going to come back. I kept going down to the river to see if the river was coming up so when I saw the river starting to rise, which is right at the end of the runway, well, I turned the power off at about twenty minutes after two, and took the best airplane that we had, the most expensive one and flew it out.

S: Where did you fly it?

H: First I was concerned because I didn't know if there was going to be another wave come through so the first thing I did after I got off was head for the damsite. I took off just about the time it hit the middle of Rexburg--so I saw the wall of water moving and watched the trailer courts float. I saw the airplanes and the hangers. The trailer court that is just west of the airport, it just moved all in unison for a while, just like it was being transported. All of them moved together, they stayed in their approximate locations. Then they started drifting apart. Of course, there were really

only three landmarks that you could see at the Rexburg airport so I could get perspective. One of them was the county shed, the bow string truss part of that building was still above water, and the top of our building was still above water, and then one building south of us was above water. I could get the perspective of what was happening. You could see the houses floating down the river. I was concerned whether there was another wave and so I went up to the dam and could see that there wouldn't be any other waves that there would only be one. I wanted to find the north border so I flew down the fact of it and could see where it came down the north side. It came down the north side about a mile south of St. Anthony and ran into the river there. On the South Fork, the water dumped into the river about half way between the river bridge and the Buttes.

S: What did the water look like as you watched it come into Rexburg from the air.

H: It was like a gray cloud of dust. The pressure from the water had a rolling cloud of dust right in front of it. Of course, you could see the logs. A lot of people don't understand that there was a lot of brush and logs on the backwaters of the dam. I could see these logs, not rolling but tumbling end to end, as the wall of water progressed. And so it literally beat everything to death in its path. In fact, we had two airplanes, big airplanes, that it actually cut off the tail assemblies and the wing assemblies, it literally cut them off.

S: Did you see any animals as you were flying?

H: Well, yes in some places you'd see the animals running away from it.

S: Did you see any other behaviors, such as animals running into the water or anything?

H: No, I didn't see any animals running into it, most of them were away from it. The only two fires that I saw, there was fire started right after I

took off, out here by the north Rexburg, right where the electrical wholesale place is. There was a little place right in there and I saw that one burning and it had burned down to the water line. And then the other one was over at the Co-op Bulk plant and the power company, it had appeared that there were some transformers or something and there was kind of an explosion, puffs of smoke and fire coming out of there but that's the only two fires that I saw.

S: As you were flying over all this, and seeing it from that advantage point, what were your feelings about what was happening say, as far your own home thinking about what would happen to that?

H: I never once thought about it. The thing I was concerned with was the people that were and that's the only consideration my son had. He wasn't worried about his five children or his wife, he was concerned with the people who were stranded.

S: Where did you go when you finally landed the plane?

H: I'd made arrangements with my wife and I told her to leave just before I took off and told her to leave and get out of there. She said, "Where shall I pick up up." I said, "Well, you'd better stop at Rigby first and if I'm not there go to Idaho Falls." Well, of course, she went to Rigby because I'd gone up to the dam and spent this hour or more surveying the situation. She went to Rigby and then went to Idaho Falls and I wasn't there. So she got tinkering about it, "well why should he come to Idaho Falls," and so then she came back to Rigby and by the time she got back to Rigby, I was there.

S: Now you mentioned your own home was damaged by the flood. Did you see this at all while you were flying, did you happen to see it?

H: No, I didn't look for my own home. All you could see everywhere was the body of water and the things that were floating and the movement and this type of thing. Of course, we weren't too far from where the sawmill was.

Of course, the sawmill burner, part of it, was still burning and smoking when the water first hit it. Then after awhile it put it out and so it quit burning.

S: So where did you stay for the next few days after the flood?

H: Well, I stayed that night, we stayed down in Rigby at the Lee's residence. Now, I should tell you that I was back that night about 5:30 or 6:00 I flew over the area again. My son-in-law--I don't know how he ever got in touch with me--who is right north of the airport was concerned about his home, his name is Rich Andrus. So he got a hold of me at the Lee's and so we got in the airplane and come back up and surveyed the damage about 5:30 that evening. And of course, by then you could see the tremendous amount of destruction because the main body of the water had already passed. Then a good portion of it was going around the north side of the Butte and out that way to Roberts. I thought for sure it would get into Lewisville, but it never did.

S: When were you able to first return to your home and how did you find things when you did?

H: Well, I came back the next morning, which was Sunday morning. I came back and to get into Rexburg we had to come through out through the Snake River Bridge out Ririe way, come up over the hill. Then I walked down to the house and my wife went with me and we walked down and found out the conditions in the home and so forth.

S: How did you find things there, can you tell any of the things that happened?

H: In our home, we had a full basement and then upstairs. In the house the water had gone down probably 2 1/2 feet. Of course, I had drains in my basement, three of them. Of course, it had gone through our garage, took out both doors and went right on through it and come in through the house and broke the doors down the bottom so that it had three drains that it could get out of. So it had lowered about three feet from where it was. It came

up to the first floor about 14-16 inches on the main floor.

S: What were your feelings when you viewed your home? Did you have any feelings during this time of despair or what?

H: It was almost sickening. I mean my wife, she looked at her beautiful blue carpet we had just had in a few months and saw the couple of inches of gray mud and she was sick. But there wasn't anything that you could do about it. So we worked, that was on Sunday morning. I came immediately that morning, in fact, even before I went home I came up. I was concerned with what was happening here on the campus, some of the businesses I run for Ricks College. I was concerned with the food services and their housing and what was happening. So I came up and talked to our people here and I could see that they had things organized and were going. So Sunday we spent all day mucking mud and trying to get places to get the water out. There was people from Ucon in our area came up with and they were the most wonderful piece of machinery that I have ever seen, manure pumps. They are the things that really pumped out the basements. They'd take about, I think 2500 or 3000 gallons at a load and they'd back up and knock out the basement windows and put the hose down in there and it would suck mud as long as you kept the mud stirred up, why it would suck mud and everything else out slicker than a whistle.

S: So you had volunteer help then. How would you analyze or talk about the volunteers who helped you?

H: Well, it never would have been possible if you hadn't had them. No way. In fact, for eight days my wife and I carried mud as long as there was any daylight and we didn't even touch it, the amount of mud that was in the house. We just didn't even scratch the surface. It was about Tuesday or Wednesday when things started to really get organized and people started coming in with equipment and were ready to go.

S: What finally happened to your home, were you able to get back into it?

H: Yes. We stayed up here on the campus and my daughter-in-law and her husband made reservations here on the campus to stay in an apartment and so we stayed with them I think for about a week. Then we moved back to our house and lived upstairs on the 3rd floor and camped. Came up here for meals, went back and worked during the daytime and came up to the college at night.

S: Now, how did you find conditions at your business at the airport when you went back?

H: Devastating. All the doors and the windows were broken out. The one huge door which we had in the hanger which is 68 feet wide was pushed in, the body of the water had pushed it in the middle of the building. We had seven feet in the office, we had eight filing cases and they were all full, absolutely crammed full, in fact, the day before, my wife had talked about getting some more filing cases because we had things too full. And it took two of them, two of those full filing cases, right out through the window that's the only way I can figure they got out of there. One of them we never did find and the other one we found four and a half miles away. Of course, that was only part of the destruction. I mean we had aircraft in the hanger. Engines that we had completely assembled, we had engines sitting on the tables ready to be put back together and they were just stirred up in the mud.

S: Once you realized that your family was safe and over the course of the next few weeks as you started to see the damage to your home and your business, what bothered you the most. What did you see as the greatest problem you had to face at that time?

H: Well, the greatest problem that was bothering me, I had four families that were depending on business for a livelihood and how they were going to get along with no business and no activity. This was the most frustrating thing. We told them that even though they couldn't do anything and we couldn't work and the airport was closed, in fact the runway was half gone, that I just

told them, "Well, I'll just keep you on the payroll and we'll work it out."

S: As you observed these various organizations who helped such as the Red Cross and the LDS church and the government and their various capacities, how would you analyze the effect of the different groups?

H: As far as the school was concerned, I mean as far as getting here the first, I think that the Safeway stores was the first one. Now one person you ought to interview if you haven't is Robert Kirkham. Robert was the one that run the food service here on campus and he could tell you who gave them the most service, but I know as far as the school was concerned I think Safeway was one of the first ones. The next one, I'm talking about who came first, the next one was the Mennonites. They helped us very materially, and they were the first. Of course the bulk of the amount of money involved as far as feeding the people and housing the people was the LDS church, was by far was in and above the greatest contributor of any. I would have to say they were not quite as fast as some of the others. You asked me about the business, there was one other thing that in our bulk plant. Aviation Fuel Bulk Plant at the airport, we had underground tanks. We didn't know why but it happened about two days before we had the tanks filled, they were full of fuel. Of course, it swept away all the super structure, the flood just took everything away, big concrete slabs and this kind of thing. But the interesting thing was that there were some three inch fill pipes right on the top of the tanks and it had turned them over and literally screwed the tanks, screwed these fill pipes out and laid them on the ground and took all the gasoline out and left 21,000 gallons of mud and water in two tanks. There wasn't one cup of gasoline left in those tanks. And not one thread on the fill pipes was damaged not one. All we had to do was screw them back in and put some pressure on them and straighten them up and they were ready to use.

Of course, we had to go inside the tanks, clean them, dig out the mud, the sand, the dirt, the water and I tied the thing and we rebuild the super structure.

S: Now, because of having your own home damaged and your businesses also, you've I would imagine had to file claims with the government, how have you felt about their handling of your particular claims?

H: We haven't got our reimbursement as far as the Bureau is concerned. We were advised to go the SBA route first, which we did. There they would only loan less than fifty percent of what you actually had involved. If you could put up with it. It triples your bookkeeping, because you have to keep that straight. In many, many cases, they are very, very slow, working with any government agency. Then the problem with the government is they change personnel so fast and they had a lot of people in here that didn't give a darn as far as doing their job was concerned, when they get out of here they move here and then they go to the next one and they don't have to worry about picking up the pieces that they didn't do right. So I spent weeks helping the ones that came later straightening up the messes that should have been done right at the beginning. But as far as their cooperation is concerned, it's been over a year and we would never have been back in business if we hadn't got some money from someplace. The one good thing about it, if I had to do it again, I'd do it because the fact that we went the SBA route and then it verifies how much money you lost. In other words, twice you have to determine it, once for the SBA and then you do it again for the Bureau. So twice you've gone over the same ground and you determine what the actual costs are and when you first make your first claim and try to borrow money you've got to figure out how much did I lose. Well, this was the hardest thing and I had two people spend about three weeks just writing items down. Then to save time I just took prices off the top of my head

and I find out that in practically every instance they are way low. In fact, in ten items I was \$18,000 short. You have to remember that I've been business since 1947, so and over this period of years you accumulate inventory, parts, machinery, trucks, automobiles, this type of thing, you see, that amounts to a tremendous amount of money. And what I bought them for and paid for them when I got them, they just can't be replaced in this day and age for any amount of money.

S: Without naming any names, do you know of any people in the community or have you heard of any that have filed fraudulent claims?

H: No, I don't know of any. I don't know of any that filed fraudulent claims. I don't know of anybody. I don't receive the claim so I don't have no way of knowing. I have too much to do to worry about other people's problems.

S: Now, there's been some talk lately now that there is a lot of building and construction go on in Rexburg about sub-contractors and others who are coming into town and taking advantage of the situation.

H: There is definitely. I've hired some of them. And they are people, individuals and companies, who have been literally outrageous in the prices they charge and the work they do and how they do it. In fact, in every instance, and I have done all my life I've done electrical work and mechanical work and I think I know what I'm talking about. I built my own home, every bit of it except the plastering. I've done contracting, general contracting, several homes in Rexburg so I think I know what I'm talking about. In every instance, every person that I've hired that I didn't know in the area, I got stung royally. And the only reason I did is, the only reason I hired them, was because the people that are here and that had done work for me for so many years just couldn't get at it for a year and I couldn't wait for a year. So I had no choice. Electricians particularly, I've had them work two or three days and got rid of them because they weren't getting anything done

and when they did get it done I had to do it over and it's the most frustrating thing in the world is to get somebody that wants to work. They all seemed to have an attitude, they don't say it, but they have an attitude of, "While the getting's good, I'm going to get all I can." To give you an idea, in the electricians for example, people are here and have been in business for years. Their normal service charges had been between ten and or around ten dollars and some as low as eight, no more than twelve dollars. And I was unable to hire any electrician who had nothing, where I furnished all the tools, the cheapest I was able to find was \$15. And one of them was \$22 and I had to pay travel time from Idaho Falls and back.

S: As you have watched during this last year the recovery process of the community in general, what sort of positive things do you think have come out of this whole experience and what sorts of negative things did?

H: I think many of the people took the attitude that I wasn't going to do anything after a while, after I got the minimum done. I made up my mind that I was not going to do anything until things settled down. For example, people have got gyped and fact we have in our home, we had people who agreed to lay linoleum. They sent us a bill for 65 yards and I made the measurements and there was only 50 and I was being very liberal. They charged tax on the labor as well as the materials and this kind of stuff going on you see. But now that's the negative aspect. The other negative aspect is that the wage picture is that everybody has too much to do and so nobody is interested in working. As a result that moves up the scale. That just pushes up the wage scale artificially with no production and that's the disadvantage. People get the wrong impression. Positive aspects, I don't know of any case really you could go anywhere in Rexburg--now there may have been some stealing that I don't know about--but I know as far as the homes were concerned, you could

go to any person's home in Rexburg and absolute everything was open. I mean, if somebody wanted to steal it, there was pianos, there was organs, there was musical instruments, there was everything all the houses up and down the street and every house in the whole block was open. There could have been and there may have been some, truck loads of people coming in and hauling it off, but the local residence, there wasn't any of that that I could find going on. So there was a positive working together. I think as far as Ricks College in concerned, because we had had some problems with a few people in the community that felt that Ricks College--some of the businessmen, for example, but I don't believe there's anybody if they were in the flood zone, at least that don't have a keen appreciation for Ricks College.

S: Now, prior to the construction of the dam, were you in favor of it?

H: Yes. In fact, I had been in favor of it all the way long and I think it ought to be rebuilt. I had been a farmer too. If the darn fools had of just used an old farmer's common sense it would have never of broken. We were over that dam, we fly, we give instruction, we were over that dam three or four times a day and they were filling that dam at the rate of seven feet a day. And they didn't have anyway of letting that water out. Any farmer knows that the first time you build a dam, you put a little water in it and let it settle and then you put a little water in it the next three or four days and let that settle or you're going to wash out the whole blasted ditch. Now any dumb farmer knows that.

S: Brother Hart, as you have looked back on this last year and this whole experience, have you noticed anything that has changed in your own attitudes, in your own values? What sort of lesson, if any, do you think that you personally have gotten out of this whole experience, or are there any ways in which it's changed you or your attitudes?

H: Well, I think that many people feel this way and I've heard it expressed that material things don't really mean very much. It's your life and your health and the way people and your friends and the people that you work with is the important things. Material things you really don't need very much.

S: Well, I don't have any more specific questions. Is there anything else that you would like to say at this time or any other feelings that you would like to express?

H: No, I don't know of any other. It has been interesting to chat with you.

S: Well, thank you very much.