TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Lester J. Petersen

Interviewed by

Alyn B. Andrus

August 24, 1977

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#36

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 Lester T. Petersen, I, Alyn B. Andrus (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.

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Interviewer's Signature

August 24, 1977
Date

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INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

You have been interviewed in connection with a joint oral history program of the History Department, Utah State University, Ricks College, and the Idaho State Historical Society. The purpose of this oral history program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview has been made by the interviewer. A verbatim typescript of the tape will be made and a final typed and edited transcripts, together with the tape will be made and a final will then be filed in the Milton R. Merrill Library Special Collections, David O. McKay Library at Ricks College, and the Idaho State Historical Society in Boise. This material will be made available according to each of the depositories' policies for research be scholars and by others for scholarly purposes. When the final transcript is completed, a personal copy will be sent to you.

* * * * *

In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, Lester J. Petersen, 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.

Lester J. Petersen
Interviewee's Signature

August 24 1977
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Lester J. Petersen

INTERVIEWER: Alyn B. Andrus

DATE: August 24, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

On June the 5th, 1976, I was just completing my morning office work at the office and Lola called. It was a Saturday, approximately a quarter to 12:00 and she said, "It's over the radio that the Teton Dam has broken." We really didn't know what would happen. We knew the Teton Dam was being built 15 miles from Rexburg and I hadn't ever given serious consideration about the failure of it. We've known several people from the ward and from Rexburg that were building the dam and we had every reason to believe that it was a good, worthwhile project so this came as quite a surprise. Over the radio they said, "It looks like Rexburg will have one or two feet of water in it," suggesting that everybody evacuate their homes and put some form of obstruction up to the windows or things like that. They actually stated over the radio that the people on the north side of Rexburg's Main Street should evacuate but those on the south side should be okay. However, they were having lots of radio comments. Nobody knew exactly what would happen and as the police sheriff's office and the radio were alerting the people to get out of their homes and to get onto high ground, they were suggesting they go to Ricks College.

This presented some problems for us because we had fifty people at the Golden Living Center. When they announced that they should be moved we felt like that if they were to get up on the second story of the Viking Motel they would be safe, so at first we had them move over the the Viking Motel on the second floor. However, at that time I

was called to the hospital to deliver a baby and while I was up to the hospital with field glasses you could look toward Sugar City and see the water coming. The water actually just looked like a gray substance over the ground and you could actually see the water come to a home and a few minutes later the home would start to float, would float down a little ways and then often would collapse. When I saw this with my own eyes I actually became scared. I called Lola and told her that I felt like that the 50 people from the Living Center should be moved from the motel and go up on higher ground at the college. She said that just before I called a policeman came and had told her to move them up to the college and so that was being done. I finished delivering the baby and I could look down and see the water come right by the hospital over to my office.

One of the first things that happened was a home about two blocks away from my office actually floated right down the street and lodged on the parking lot of my office. The water actually began around 2:00 to appear in Rexburg and it seemed to crest at about 5:00 or 6:00. During that time most of the people were up to the college on higher ground watching the water. It came with very sever force. It actually lifted buildings, animals, broke windows, just caused extensive destruction to just about every place in town.

Our home was hurt and damaged probably the most. The water went in the basement and out the garage and upstairs. At the level of the home the water was approximately four feet deep. My office water level was between three and four feet. The water level at the Golden Living Center was just at the brick before entry to the windows but none happened to enter the windows.

Well, as a result of this flood it completely changed our lives. The businesses seemed to change. Of course, this immediately ruined the motel on the lower story. All of the furniture, carpet, floor covering, sheet rock, and insulation were damaged. Our home, it is a four-level home, three levels were under water and massive cleanup was necessary. My office had approximately three or four inches of mud on the upstairs floor, the main office floor, and the basement was approximately three feet of water. The Golden Living Center actually had mainly water damage to the carpet and of all the businesses it was probably hurt the least. The homes the Petersen Enterprises owns were all damaged. The Morford home, the Umphrey home, and also the Christensen home, and all of them probably beyond repair. The Trost home likewise had water damage but it will be able to be fixed. Well, this happened on a Saturday. You just cannot believe the destruction.

It's interesting the Suzanne was over in London and she tried to call Saturday night. She had heard about it over the news and tried to call. David was in Florida and he tried to call when he heard about it Sunday, but of course the telephone lines were out. Mark was coming home from Mexico with his friend, Bruce Hough. They heard about it on Tuesday and he tried to call; however, the telephone lines and all communications were out of commission.

Lola and I took the 50 people from the Living Center and we stayed with them the first night at Ensign Hall on the bottom floor and then spent the next day trying to find out their families and get in touch with them so that they could come get them. At this time and the next day a massive cleanup effort was undertaken. We were really fortunate in having a lot of family and friends, the families of

Ralph, Mary Lou, Robert and many, many others were helping us. They have really stood by and helped us. Ted and his family have come just about every day, as well as Ralph, and this had really helped. Here we are three weeks away from the flood. During the last three weeks we have spent just all of our time at cleaning up the mess. It's interesting about the hospital practice. During this time they declared the area a disaster area and because all of the doctors in Rexburg had their businesses wiped out we were successful in having some Air Force doctors come in for two weeks to take care of the emergencies. There were not too many serious emergencies even though the destruction of property was very severe from Wilford to Blackfoot. There were only ten lives lost, which was very small in comparison to the total amount of property damage.

Now, during this time I delivered a baby about every day that the floodwaters were going. The hospital was not damaged, and was just high enough. The water came within a block of the hospital but it did not have any damage to it, so this was nice from a practice standpoint. After we got the people away from the Living Center and to their families one interesting thing happened. The administrator of the Ashton Hospital called and wanted to know if we wouldn't be interested in putting the people there. I suppose if we had known about htis at the time we probably would have done that. However, we didn't and so they were scattered to their various families.

The various state and church agencies played a fantastic part. Ricks College initially housed everyone in the community that needed housing. They opened up the Manwaring Center and they said that for some meals they were serving 10,000 people. All families were the same,

left homeless, living in strange places at the college. But the people actually took it very good. There was a spirit of cooperation and work. Everybody needed help. Everybody worked hard. People did not have time to be sick. It was just amazing. At this time the church programs really were interesting to watch. The welfare programs actually helped provide a lot of the food for the college to use and then clothing, the Red Cross, the state agencies, all of these services were given in the area. The government declared it a disaster area and this brings a lot of funds. Right at this point we do not know if we will be reimbursed for any of our losses; however, this is a little different than a natural disaster because the Teton Dam was a manmade and a governmental made project, and it seems now that because of this there will be some consideration. However, at the present time we don't know. Our loss has really been great. My office basement loss alone, in which I had surgical and medical supplies for approximately two years will approximate $20,000 to $30,000.

Now, looking back during the two weeks time, it actually took us two and a half weeks to clean up the Living Center. We took out the carpet, had to clean it all. We had a lot of help from the Church and other places, volunteer help, and after two and a half weeks we were back in operation at the Golden Living Center. We started calling the people on Monday to tell them that we'd be open on Wednesday and on Wednesday 35 people came. They were really anxious to get back.

Now, the motel is interesting. Just about two weeks before the managers had quit and so we were there without a manager and immediately when the flood came it wiped out all of our bottom units and so Grandma

and Grandpa Petersen managed the motel for us. We were able to rent out the top units as soon as the power and water could be used and then we started a massive cleanup. We had to order new furniture, carpet and floor coverings for the lower units and those walls had to be torn out, new flooring had to be put in, as well as perfortaping, painting and all that goes with it. We did order furniture. We think that within two weeks that will be here; the carpet should be here next week. Right at the present time we are renting 31 out of the 43 units and within two weeks we should be back to our full 43 units ready for rental. Because of the disaster we have been able to rent some of the units on the lower floor that have been cleaned up without carpet because there is such a high demand for motel rooms.

Now, my office, we were closed entirely for two weeks. After two weeks we were able to open on a limited basis. After three weeks practice seemed to be somewhat as usual. However, it is still a little different because people by and large are without jobs and income and the office has been a little slow regarding payments and other things. Really, we don't know how the economy is going to affect this.

We took a few days off to go down to Salt Lake to pick up Suzanne on the 15th of June. She came home from Europe. She was bubbling with excitement, anxious to get home because she was concerned about the flood. We actually had a good time, we went to Salt Lake in the afternoon, turned around and came back that night, got home at 4:00 in the morning. However, it was really well worth it. Suzanne has had a wonderful time. Mark came home from Mexico a few days earlier. Both of them have really been pitching in and helping us to clean up the mess from the flood, and we really appreciate them.

Now, because our home was so severely damaged it was necessary for us to buy a trailer. We wondered about getting one of the HUD homes, that's the Housing and Urban Development homes; however, when I went down and applied they seemed to have so many in front of us and so many that needed it worse that we decided that we better buy one from the Rexburg Mobile Home Sales. So we did purchase a mobile home and it was placed just east of our home. We will live in that for a few months until our home is ready for occupancy again.

I need to mention just a little about H. Lester and LuSeba. This has, of course, affected their home and all of their basement completely full of water and mud. The mud was so thick you couldn't believe it and required just bucketing out. All of the basement walls had to be taken out and insulation, heating system, electrical system, and this has really been hard on him and also mother. Bill and Marilyn Hansen have helped so much. They have brought equipment and their family and their friends have actually worked two full weeks, trying to help us, and it's just been an amazing cooperative effort with all of the neighborhood. We found tires and one 30-gallon drum of sealed oil, 10-30 weight oil in the basemnet. It was Pacific Co-op oil that apparently came from the Co-op somewhere, which is a half a mile away, floated down and went in our basement. There was all kinds of debris all over. Even homes, the golf course had several homes on it, logs, trees, the park was just one big mess, every tree caught lots of things. It's just something that's indescribable, the destruction. The water not only came with water but came with such force and it was so muddy that that force reminded one of just a brick wall coming through the town and destroying everything in its pathway.

It was interesting that on the Sunday after the flood, one week after the flood, President Kimball and Elder Boyd K. Packer came. They had two general meetings at the field house, both of them packed full with capacity. President Kimball spoke and told how the welfare program would help and how the people were feeling sorry and would help and they told the people not to get discouraged but to get up and clean their yards, and I think this generally helped the spirit of the people.

From my own position I actually feel like Rexburg is going to be a better town because it actually destroyed everything but the attitude is good, we're going to build up and every business that I have is going to be better; my office is going to be better, we are going to have a better motel; we have already ordered furnishings and other things; the Golden Living Center is going to be better, and there will be a construction boom in Rexburg that will be unbelievable. Because of all of this I think five or ten years down the road Rexburg will actually be a new, modern, bustling metropolis, and I suppose we're proud to be a part of it.

One thing this had done--Lola has been a tremendous administrator. She's kept crews of 20 and 30 working at the Living Center, in the motel and in my office. We have actually had a lot of things going and we've just had to doubletime in order to keep on top of them. We do have some new prospects for some really nice managers for the motel. It is Lew and Betty VanDusen from Mack's Inn. They came one day, then they had a death in the family. We hope they'll be returning soon but as of this time there is nothing really definite but they should be really good managers and we hope for the very best as far as they are concerned.

This will actually chalk up to be one of the very, very history making events for our bicentennial year; the month of June will certainly not go forgotten. We're thankful that more people were not killed, we're also thankful that this broke in the daytime rather than in the nighttime. We're thankful that it broke when the weather was warm instead of cold and many other things. Most of all I suppose we're thankful that we have family and friends that can help us in time of need.

This is September 17, 1976. It seems the time has passed so fast this summer we hardly have had time to get our thoughts together. It has been a summer of fixing and repairing. In regard to the motel the VanDusens were not able to accept the assignment of motel management and so George and Blanche Madsen were hired. The Madsens are very likeable people and are anxious to do their job. Their home was destroyed in the flood and they were really anxious to have another home to live in, and during the last three months we have been extremely happy with the work which they have done. It is necessary for us to refinish all of the lower units, take off the sheet rock, new insulation, new floor coverings, new subfloor furniture completely, as well as several new items of equipment in each room. We felt extremely fortunate in being able to have the motel back in operation after approximately one month, furniture and other things being entirely new. It was very lucky for us because the demand for motel rooms has been great. We have also needed to get new heaters and air conditioners for all the lower units and in reality now the lower units appear to be completely new.

The Golden Living Center has been a little slower. The finishing carpet should be completed this week. This means it has actually taken nearly three months for the carpet to get here and be installed. The residents of the Living Center have been extremely patient. They have been living with just concrete floors without any floor covering and they certainly enjoy the carpet. We are very pleased with this type of service, the type of carpet is very colorful and seems to add to the general appearance of the Living Center.

My practice has been somewhat unusual this summer. We have been busy with some of the things which were not of the ordinary variety related with the flood. There have been sore throats and coughs. We have called the coughs the flood cough. It seems to be caused from a virus and also aggravated very much by an allergy. It is extremely difficult to get rid of in spite of the treatment. We call this the "dam cough" and whatever name it goes by it has really been a persistant rascal to treat. I have also been very busy with deliveries. During the month of July I had 27 deliveries, which is somewhat of a record for me. Throughout this time we were very busy itemizing our losses and applying to the Small Business Administration for disaster loans. It seems like the loans were applied for just about the time the Bureau of Reclamation came out and Congress stated that they would make full restitution to cover all losses. This actually requires that we itemize very carefully for the Bureau of Reclamation claims. All of our businesses have been itemized and our claims have been submitted now for nearly four weeks. We have been told that it will be another two or three weeks before the final settlement is made on our claims, and at that time we will make a complete report.

Our home has actually been the most difficult to repair. We have had Ted Wright and Terry Archibald help us all summer. They have been extremley good carpenters, working under the direction of Reed Hollist and his son. At the present time we are nearly ready for the painters and hope to be in within the next month or two. This makes a complete remodeling job the second time within one year. We have been very fortunate to have a trailer home for us to live in during this time so that we have not had to really live in the mess.

Mark went back to Guadalajuara to medical school August 1st. He has been doing well. He called just a few days ago and stated he had just completed his course in biochemistry and everything seems to be going fine. Suzanne started Ricks College for her second year. She seems to be adjusting well. Michelle started Junior High, just got new contacts from Kent Archibald who just started his optometry practice. She seems to enjoy those very well. Lola is being released from her job as music director and Relief Society counselor in the ward and has been asked to take a stake job in the Relief Society. She will now be attending a lot of the college branch classes.

I have been busy with the College 5th Branch as branch president. Leo Archibald and John Walker are my counselors. We've had a busy three weeks getting organized but do have a very good branch of approximately 120 girls and 80 boys in the branch. We have had several activities as well as about three meetings, and things seem to be going well.