

Oral History Project of Dr. Max Atkinson's
Idaho Northwest History Class
Ricks College
Rexburg, Idaho 83440

Donated by Max Atkinson
To the Ricks College Archives
October 1979

1914
April 14
1914

Jenni Leonard
April 14 1914
Dear Mr. Hellingworth
I have just received your letter of the 13th and am glad to hear from you. I am well and hope these few lines will find you the same. I am sure you are busy with your work but I thought I would write you a few lines to let you know how I am getting on. I am still in the hospital and am not yet out of bed. I am sure you are all well and I hope to see you all soon. I am sure you are all well and I hope to see you all soon. I am sure you are all well and I hope to see you all soon.

Jenni Leonard

Guy M. Hellingworth

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT NO. 1

BY
Guy M. Hollingsworth

IDAHO NORTHWEST

Dr. Atkinson

April 21, 1977

"My name is Guy Hollingsworth. Today is April 14, 1977. I am going to interview Jenni Leonard. The general topic will be the Teton Flood Disaster."

"Mrs. Leonard, would you please spell your name?"

"Jenni Leonard."

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in Sewickley, Pennsylvania."

"Where were your parents born?"

"They were both born in Preston, Idaho."

"How long have you lived in St. Anthony?"

"About nine months."

"What is your present occupation?"

"I'm a housewife."

"Mrs. Leonard, would you tell me where you were at the time of the dam breakage?"

"I was home cleaning my house listening to the radio. I heard the announcer on the radio say that he was going out to the dam site to report on a crack which had been found in the dam."

"Where was your husband at the time of the dam breakage?"

"Well, it was a Saturday. My husband works for Utah Power and Light and they were putting in pumps for the farmers. He had been working up by the dam and he had seen the dam break. His boss told them that they were to go home and tell their wives and families how serious it was."

"What were your first thoughts?"

"Before my husband came home I really wasn't too worried because I had been up to the dam before and I just didn't think that the water could reach Rexburg."

"What were the first things that you wanted to save?"

"I was pregnant at the time so I couldn't lift anything very heavy, so I got things like our photo albums, church records, tax records and things like that."

"Where did you first go?"

"My husband told me to go out to his boss's home which is located south of Rexburg. When I got there we went to Ericksons Hill, thats out by the Archie road. We sat up on the hill with hundreds of other people just watching the water come in. The longer we waited we could see where the water was and we decided to rush down to Bailey's (my husband's boss's home). When we got there we thru food from the freezer and refridgerator into their boat and camper. We also saved their horses by tieing them on to the back of the camper and then taking them up on the hill and tieing them to a telephone pole. As we watched the water we kept thinking we had alot of time. I kept thinking of all the things at my home that I could have been saving, but my husband had the pickup because he was still working so I couldn't do anything. Since the poles were all falling down and electricity was going out Utah Power and Light had to keep working. I didn't see my husband until the next day, and I didn't know how he was. We got alot of things at Baily's home, things like food and water because we didn't know how long we would have to stay up there on the hill. Everyone up on Ericksons hill was quite miserable. People were crying and upset. It was really quite a scarey feeling watching the water come in."

"Besides what you saved, did you lose everything else at your house?"

"No, after the waters recided the next day we were able to go into town. We found our trailer, it had only drifted about forty feet. It had smashed into a big double wide trailer that had a cement foundation. It was crunched inbetween two trailers but we were still able to get into it. The trailer was demolished some of the dishes were broken and some of our cloths had floated away. I had just bought some new things for the baby that we were expecting and they were all ruined. Within a weeks time we had everything out of the trailer and we were trying to wash it up to see what we could save. Most of the small electrical appliances were ruined to the extent that they couldn't be repaired. There were some cloths that washed up and also some of the dishes that weren't broken that washed up. As for the television and the mattresses they

were ruined because they sat in the silt too long because I couldn't lift them and my husband had to keep working."

"Where exactly did you live in Rexburg?"

"We lived on fifth west, it's across from the Kennedy Elementary Grade School."

"What were your feeling when you went back to your house and saw that everything was ruined?"

"As we drove up to the trailer house I looked through the kitchen window, and the trailer was sitting on its side and all the furniture was smashed up against one side. To tell you the truth all I could do was cry."

"How did you feel about most of your things being lost?"

"Well, there had been rumors since the flood that the government was going to reimburse us all so it wasn't the feeling that we weren't going to have anything again. It was the feeling of what were we going to do until we did get the money."

"You say that your husband works for Utah Power and Light. He probably had a big part in rebuilding this area as far as electricity is concerned. Can you tell me some of the things that he did after the flood?"

"Well, the Utah Power and Light yard was really a big mess and they had to be able to get into there before they could do anything. So they spent a good week cleaning up the yard. Crews from all over the area were called in there were lots of men from Salt Lake and Lava and all the areas that Utah Power and Light serves. There were over five hundred men that came to help. They needed to clean up the yard so they could get out their trucks. They got out their trucks and they started to put up power lines mainly for the business since everyone was up at the college staying and no one was staying at their homes. They had to get electricity to the gas stations and the Safeway store.

"Where did you live after the flood?"

"My father in law, who lives just outside of Preston, works for Utah Power and Light also and the next day when Utah Power and Light sent all the crews up my father in law brought up his fifteen foot travel trailer for us to live in. He also brought up about fifty gallons of water, because the telephone service was out and no one down in Preston knew how bad it was. He also brought us a bunch of

food. We lived in the travel trailer from June sixth until the fourth of July when we moved into our new trailer in St. Anthony. But while we lived in the travel trailer we parked it on Bailey's driveway and hooked up to their electricity and water."

"Where did most of the other people in Rexburg live after the flood?"

"Most of them lived at the college. They lived at the college for at least three weeks until the hud trailers started coming in. Those that didn't live at the college stayed with relatives. Then there were alot of people that just left the area because they didn't think it was worth it to stay and try to salvage some of their stuff.

"What did you use for transportation after the flood? How were the roads around Rexburg?"

"When the flood hit my husband told me to go up to Ericksons hill with Mrs. Bailey and so I took our pickup up there with me, while my husband went down to Utah Power and Light and drove all the trucks and equipment up on the hill. As far as the roads were since we saved our pickup we were able to get along quite well. My husband took the pickup to work most of the time but he would take me to town to get the grocery's. As you would walk along the sidewalks on Main Street the sidewalks would just cave in. The roads were really bad as you drove along you would sink or fall in to a big pit. It was really a mess for the first few days. One thing about the flood though was that the people of Rexburg really kept their humor. For the first few days I was so depressed, I kept wondering what we were going to do. I thought they would never get the town back to normal and already it's nicer than it used to be. There are alot of new business that have come in and it seems to be real nice. The people of Rexburg really did keep their humor though. They would put signs on the outhouses, and when they would put all their junk out on the sidewalk to be picked up they would write little notes like: This is Noahs Ark stop here. As we drove around the next day after the flood there were dead cows and pigs all over the roads. It was kind of commical in a way, one stores manicans had floated away to a housing area and the people had found it and propped it up against a tree. As we drove by we thought it was a real person and it scared us to death."

"Where did the most help come from outside the Rexburg area?"

"The church had volunteers come from all over even as far as Nevada. Ofcourse the government sent the Army reserve and the National Guard in to help stop things like looting from going on. There had to be alot of patrolling especially at night and they did catch a few looters. All in all though I guess the LDS church and the government had the programs that really helped the area to recover."

"Did the government treat you fairly after the flood disaster?"

" Yes, it was hard to file our claim because there were alot of things we didn't think about until after we had filed our claim and had gotten our money. There was such a hassel and so much red tape to go through to try and redo your claim that we just let it go. But the government treated us fairly, on our first claim they paid us everything that asked for and we only asked for what we had lost. I think they treated everyone really well and as long as everyone was honest then they didn't have any trouble getting what they had claimed. The Red Cross also was an organizations that helped the people of Rexburg. They set up a great big mess up on campus and after a few days they got better organized and reimbursed us for some clothing since we didn't have many left. Then they gave us some food, for food storage. Two days after the flood Utah Power and Light brought in their helicopters to help move some of the garbage. The Utah Power and Light employees got to go up in the helicopter and look around. My husband went up with his new camera and he took alot of really good pictures of the flood. He got to fly right over the dam, the pictures are really interesting now that it's all over.

"Where was your husband when the dam broke?"

"He was putting in a farmers pump up by the dam. When the water finally broke through the crack they were so stunned that they just watched for a minute. Then as they were driving down the canyon just watching they neared the Wilford area. They saw a friends horses, cows and barn be washed right away. The cows were running as fast as they could then they would turn around and just look at the big wall of water as it came towards them and they would turn and just run right into the water. The water

looked like a big cloud of dust from on top of the hill. You could see the dust flying and a few of the animals running into the water and running into the fences trying to get away from the water. When my husband came home to tell me that the flood was really bad he was just as white as a ghost because he has been seeing all these things. He even saw a couple in a car get washed right away. So many of the people wouldn't leave their homes and when Jeff came and told me I decided I had better tell some of my neighbors. So I went and told one of my neighbors and they just said, "Oh, don't worry our trailers sit three feet above the ground they won't get wet." Then I went and told another neighbor and she said, "I can't go I have cloths in the dryer." I finally convinced her to come with me up on the hill, since her husband was working fifty miles away where the flood didn't hit she stayed the night with me at the Bailey's home. When my husband gave me the truck to go up on the hill I decided to go to town and get some gas. I went to a service station and there were about fifty cars there waiting to get gas so I went around the corner to another service station and it was just as bad. I fianlly went to a service station out of town and got some gas. People were just pushing and screaming, and the cops were out in the street trying to direct traffic. It was a real mess and everyone was worrying about number one. I guess of course that that's the way it would be. There were so many people that wouldn't listen to directions and so many people that wouldn't leave their homes."

"What did you do the day after the flood?"

"First thing in the morning we wanted to go and see what damage had been done to our trailer. My little brother from Preston was staying with us when the flood hit and he was really upset and I wanted to get him home. So we went to Idaho Falls to use a telephone. While we were in Idaho Falls we saw everyone rushing around because the flood hadn't gotten to them yet. We went over by the West Bank and there were just hundreds of men and boys sand bagging. The people of Idaho Falls were really scared because they had been seeing what had been happening in the Rexburg area on television. The People were working frantically. We went to some of my parents friends

home in Idaho Falls to call my parents to tell them to come and get my little brother. When I called them I told them to hurry because they expected alot of the roads and overpasses in Idaho Falls to be flooded out. They came up to get him and on there way home the roads were being closed right after them, and they were the last ones to be able to travel on the roads for awhile. When they got to Blackfoot the water was up on the road and they just made it across before the road was closed. So they just barley got my brother out."

"What did you do to aid in the clean-up after the flood?"

"We wern't able to get to our trailor for five days after the flood, because there was a great big tree in the way. That's why alot of our furniture and stuff was ruined because they sat in the silt for such along time. I mainly cleaned up my own home, I got my dishes out of the trailor and I had to go out to somecnes home south of Rexburg to wash them off. Even now I still can find dirt in the crevices of my tupperware and in some of the cracks of my furniture. The thing about the dirt was that it was so sticky that it just didn't wash off the first time it took two or three washings. It was my relatives and the people that were concerned about us that helped us clean up after the flood. I took a bunch of things to Preston and we spent two days just washing things down there. We would have to wash the cloths at least ten times before they even looked normal, and the smell of the silt was the bad thing especially when you have morning sickness. Even now if something gets muddy it's not as bad as that silty mud. As we walked through our trailor trying to pick up things paper and books would just stick to the floor, you would have to shovel them up. We shoveled about four inches of silt off of our floor, because we thought we would have to live in the trailor again. Paper things really stuck to the floor, and the floor was so slick and since the trailor was slanted you had to be really careful. We worried about our trailor being gased and we worried about it being a fire hazard. There were alot of people rippin other people off. They would tell you that they would haul your trailor somewhere for you or that they would buy your trailor from you and then they would just take it. We just cleaned out our trailor the best that we could and waited to see what would happen, and what the government

was going to do."

"How long was it before you were located in St. Anthony?"

"Exactly one month. It took us that long to find a trailer, trailers were really selling around this area. At first we went Hathaway a dealership here in St. Anthony. They were selling them like wild fire. Then we went to Idaho Falls and checked about six of them that were on the lot, and they were selling them fast to. So finally we went to Pocatello one night after Jeff got off work and that were we bought out trailer. After we had the trailer we didn't have a place to park it, so we had to go through Rexburg and check all the trailer lots. We checked in at our old trailer court but Hud trailers had already signed in there and they've got five or six more trailers in there now than they had before the flood. It was really hard to find property and ofcourse you didn't want to buy property that was damaged by the flood. We also didn't know how much money we were going to get from the government, we just didn't know what to do. So we came up here to St. Anthony and found this trailer lot and we moved right in, because everything was going so fast. We checked in Rexburg for a place but Hud trailers were moving in to fast. We could have had our old place back but we waited to long because we didn't know what to do. We were really at a standstill, we didn't know where we were going to get the money. About a month after the flood we finally got a loan from Utah Power and Light, they gave all their employees one. It's set up like the Hud program you don't have to pay on it for a year, then we have to pay the full loan back. Everything worked out good for us but there are alot of people that they didn't work out for. People I feel the sorriest for are the farmers. In this area it is basically farming and if you have driven around you can see that the top soil is washed away and it's right down to the bedrock. This is the kind of thing that you can't replace. It would take years to haul in the dirt for the farmers."

"Did your family come up and help you clean up after the flock?"

"Yes, six of my family members came up to help me. Before the area was opened up I had to go up to the college and even we had to get a permit to be in the area. To use a phone we had to

drive to Rigby because the phones were not in working order in Rexburg. I had to go up to the Army Reserve which was located on campus and I had to describe what the vehicle looked like that my family would be coming in, give them the license plate number, tell them how many would be coming, and tell them why they were coming in. The day that my family did come in I had to go meet them to give them their permit. I waited by the Lorenzo bridge until I saw them and then they pulled off the side of the road and I gave them their permit. Right after the Lorenzo bridge is where the police were stationed to see that no one was entering without a permit and to see that no one was leaving with anything that wasn't theirs. So my family came in and it took us two days to unload the trailer and pack everything up so it could be taken to Preston. We had to take our things to Preston to be washed up because there was no water facilities in Rexburg. On our way to Preston we had to stop at the Lorenzo bridge where they checked us to make sure that we weren't taking anything out that wasn't ours. We had to go through a bunch of questions like: Who are you? Who are you married to? What kind of a car do you drive? Who are these people you are with? What business did my family have to be there? Even after you showed them your permit they still had to question you. Before they started questioning people there were people coming in to tour the area that would see something along side the road and stop and pick it up so the police were trying to stop this kind of thing. I'm kind of glad that the floods over because it seemed like you were classified, and everywhere you went people asked you if you were a flood victim. Then you had to go through a lot of hassle, there just seemed to be so much security."

"Were there a lot of tourists?"

"Yes, because it was during the summer and there are a lot of tourists on their way to Yellowstone. And even though the roads were closed and you couldn't get through without a permit people still got through. It was such a mess there were people from all different areas just driving through. On Sundays it was just terrible. You couldn't go anywhere because the roads were just jammed packed. We had to take a detour from Rexburg to get to St. Anthony because we couldn't go through Sugar City. The detour was

a gravel road and it was bumpy and dirty and it smelled terrible because there was a feedlot located there and thousands of head of cattle had been drowned. It was just really a mess. Ofcourse people were curious but they didn't realize that they were causing more trouble and weren't helping situations at all. Even though the roads were bad people kept coming, and even now people still come through to see the sites. One day my husband and I were listening to the CB and we heard a trucker say, "Boy, this tornado sure made a mess here." People didn't even know the facts all they knew was that something bad had happened in this area and they wanted to come and see what it was."

"How long was it before you could come thru Rexburg without a permit?"

"It was mid-July when they finally quit taking permits because then most people had gotten most of their things cleaned up and not to many people were coming in to help clean up. A lot of people would come for a one day drive just to see what it was all about."

"Where were your church meetings held in the weeks that followed the flood?"

"Our ward held their meetings up at the Kirkham Auditorium on the Ricks College Campus. They were afraid to get too many people inside the church houses because they thought the floors might cave in. I guess there was even one church house that its floor did cave in because of the pressure on it by a lot of people besides being weakened by the flood. The LDS people spent a lot of service hours cleaning up their own churches."

"After you moved to St. Anthony was the flood behind you or did you still have things to worry about?"

"We still had to worry about our home. The trailer that we had lived in was a smaller trailer and they didn't make them anymore. So we had to invest more money in buying a new trailer. It didn't seem quite fair to me but this is a bigger trailer and we will have to pay more money. No, the flood wasn't behind us we still had to worry about making sure we claimed everything, even now there are things that we didn't get reimbursed for because we thought they could be repaired and they can't. Some of our furniture is now just starting to warp, and our mattress is starting to decay. We also had to worry about our

money situation. Many people were donating money like my husbands union, Utah Power and Light, friends, and the ASLCIO sent us a surprise check that really helped out."

"Did the flood cause any mental stress on you or other people?"

"There sure was. I have a friend who works for a doctor and she said that there was a strain on peoples minds from worrying about what they were going to do, and after the flood alot of people were having break downs. We had it pretty good because Utah Power and Light came through with our loan. Even now though as I look back and remember the day after the flood just looking at my trailor I feel terrible, it really wasn't a nice experience. Although I don't cry about it anymore there still is a soft spot in my mind. When you think about losing things that you've worked for and things you can't replace like pictures and yearbooks and special things that were given to you that ~~can't be fixed you feel really awful. There were even~~ people who weren't in the flood that had some kind of stress on them. People like my parents who had someone in the flood who kept listening to the news and couldn't get in touch with us went under quite a bit of strain. It was a strain on anyone who knew you and anyone who loved and cared about you."

"As the flood hit, could you really believe it was happening?"

"Well, I was in my kitchen making a some cookies. My parents were suppose to come that day to get my little brother who was staying with me at the time. When I heard about the dam I just thought that they would fix it because it was just a crack or a leak. I wasn't worried about it breaking. I didn't see any threat of danger. Then after the radio announced the crack they began to play music for about another half-hour. Then the announcer came back on the radio and said that water was now spirting out of the dam. I started thinking then, oh those poor people who live by the dam. I didn't think about me I thought we lived quite a ways from it. Then the dam burst and all the water was bursting out, it was then I started getting worried. I was wondering what I should do first. I was thinking that the water would just rise and that things would just get wet. I didn't realize that things would get washed away and that the water would come with such a force. I didn't think that it would move the trailor I just thought that it would get it wet. Then my husband came home and he had seen

the cattle being washed away and also a couple being washed away. He had been seeing alot of things that were going on. My husband is usually a calm person, but he was really scared. He came home as white as a ghost and told me to load up. He asked me where my little brother was and when I told him that he was out riding his bike he told me to go get him before he was drownd. Then I really started to worry because I didn't know for sure where he was at but just as we went out to look for him he drove up on his bike. I then took my husband back to the power company and I drove the truck up to Ericksons hill where I stayed. There were many things that I could have saved but we wern't thinking about material things at the time instead we were thinking about our lives. If we would have known how slow the water was comin we could have saved about everything in our traillor. Instead we just grabbed papers and things because we thought that the water was right behind us. We probably had a good hour and a half that we could have been loading things but with the radio off the air we couldn't comprehend how fast the water was moving."

"With your husband working and you being pregnant what did you do in the few days that followed the flood?"

"I sat around and sobbed alot. It was really a dramatic experience, I wanted to be with my husband and family I didn't want to have to worry about the flood. It was like living in a whole different world. When I would go to Preston, which is about 150 miles away it was just like being in a different world. There wasn't any mud, there wasn't the hurrying or the worrying that was here in Rexburg. It was nice to get away but I kept thinking of my husband back here trying to clean up this mess. It was quite a mental strain for awhile until we found out what the government was going to do for us. The Teton Dam Disaster was something that I will never forget, it was really an experience that I hope I don't have to go through again. I can really feel for all the people back east that are going through a flood right now."

"How do you feel about them rebuilding the dam?"

"We really do need the dam for irrigation, but most of the farmers are out of business right now until their top soil is replaced. If they do rebuild it again they'll probably do it right the second time, and there won't be another Teton Dam Flood."

"Well, thank-you very much Mrs. Leonard, this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers."