

Oral History Project of Dr. Max Atkinson's

Idaho Northwest History Class

Ricks College

Rexburg, Idaho 83440

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October 1979

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DAVID WESPORT

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David W. ←

Ernest Blavel

Coal Interview

Brent Havel

This is an oral interview. My name is Brent Flavel and I'm going to interview David Westcott. Brother Westcott where are you originally from?

I was born in Berkeley California.

How long have lived in Rexburg?

About a year now.

What is your occupation now?

I am a carpenter.

Prior to the flood had you been up to the dam?

Yes I was up there once.

Had you had any thoughts about the dam breaking?

No, I had never even considered it breaking. Of course I had not been around for any of the controversy of whether or not it should be built or not.

What were your thoughts when you heard the dam had broken?

We thought it was going to hit Teton and all our food storage was up there. We were worried about my wife's sister living there in a house that we had all of our food storage at. So we were going to drive out there to see if we could help them out. We heard it from the very start on the radio, it said that they were going to send someone up to the dam because they had received a prank phone-call that the dam had broken, so they sent a reporter up there and he got there just as the dam broke, he said there was a hole and all of a sudden he started screaming and said the whole north side of the dam had broken and that everybody down stream had better get out of the way. They kept reporting stuff like that. They told anyone in the vicinity of the canyon to get out. Then they said that we might get a foot or a foot and a half of water on Main Street. We were managing the Village Apartments and we had just finished refurnishing the ground floor and so we just moved everything up on the second floor. Then I went up to my in-laws house and helped him move all his equipment because he had a crane and a backhoe.

Then we went back up the hill by the east Stake Center and watched the water come in. As soon as we saw trailers and houses come in we decided that we had better get down and get our stuff out before the water got in it. So we started moving furniture and stacking furniture and tying the drapes up. Then we moved most of our belongings upstairs to the second floor because nobody was living upstairs at the time. We stacked the beds up figuring that the bottom ones would get wet but the others would be alright. But when the water hit it just smashed the door and sucked all the furniture right out. It never dawned on me that there was going to be that much water. I had never heard how much water was in the dam. In fact I don't think that they ever reported how full the dam actually was.

Did you live in this house when the flood occurred?

No, we lived at the Village and managed them. We had twenty-one apartments on the ground floor that we were responsible for that got hit. The owner came up one day and looked at the apartments and estimated the damage to get his insurance claim then left and we never saw him again. We were one of two managements that rented out upper floor rooms to the flood victims plus tried to refurnish the ground floor ourselves. Everyone else hired a contractor to do their work but we tried to do all the work ourselves. Then after we did all that work and got the apartments completely refurnished and back to normal, ready for school, the owner came up and told us that we couldn't live there if we had a log, so we moved out and moved here I say father in law's rental house. The people who lived here during the flood just packed up and left. They didn't clean it up or anything. They just took everything they could get and left and didn't ever come back. My mother in law cleaned up a lot of the upstairs and I went down and shoveled out most of the basement.

Were there a lot of people who just packed up and left?

Not too many that I know. Most of them that I know stayed and stuck it out. I don't know too many that just pulled up the stakes and moved out. I imagine that there were a few farmers that had to leave because they didn't have anything left.

Did the church volunteers help you in any way?

Yes they saved me about a months work. We were managing the Village and I was having disagreements with the management over some of his policies. I figured I would do as much as I could by myself and let the volunteers go help those families who got their homes damaged because this is a business and he can get paid back what damage that were suffered by him. He could hire help and get back on his feet that way. But the bishop came over and said that the others houses that were hit were pretty much under way so they sent fifty people over two days in a row and they got all the mud out and all the crud off the furniture and stripped the walls all the way down to the studs.

When we moved in to this house the furnace and water heater was downstairs and I had to completely take apart the hole furnace and rebuild that and I'm not very good with furnaces. So I learned about furnaces that way.

Since you're a carpenter. Are you building alot of new houses for the flood victims?

No I'm building a new Rexburg Medical Center. I have built a new office and helped rebuild the high school. We rebuilt a building that was about two hundred feet away from the river and it was just washed away. It had computers and calculators in it. So they just started from scratch and rebuilt their whole business up again. I also helped remodel the Land Bank which had just been completed prior to the flood. It was all hard wood and the flood came through and warped it all. So we had to go in and tear it all down and remodel it. I learned how to do wood-work that way, trim all the doors and window casings.

I went up to the furniture store in town and they had a \$250 recliner on sale for \$5. It was all torn up and scratched up and had a messed up corner on it, but that only took a little work and now we have a recliner that we only paid \$5 for. There were a lot of useful things that were slightly damaged, but they are still useful and there were several places that were having sales like that. The only thing these businesses could have done was to have a sale like this, or they could have just thrown everything away and then been completely reimbursed, and that is what a lot of businesses did. Some stores just took all their stuff and just pushed it out back, and I guess that if you wanted it then you could go and get it. But some other stores were going to try and salvage all of their stuff and then save it and save it and save it and then all of a sudden people showed that the fridges needed repairing, also the stoves and ovens and water heaters, so the store had to completely refurnish the people with new articles. The rest of the stock was sold to a salvager, and he found that he couldn't sell any of it because of the flood damage. About the only thing he could sell was the hardware off of certain articles.

There got to be so much give-away that everybody started walking around looking for a hand-out for awhile. This was due to the fact that there had been so much destruction, and because of being used to the destruction, kids just went right on destroying things. To make things worse, there were people that would try to save things, and they would leave their place that night after trying to do all they could to save it, and the next day they would come back to find that it had been broken down even further. Someone came into this house and scratched "FLOOD '76" in the woodwork, and this is hardwood. We bought a thermostat and put it in a frame and put a piece of glass over it. People just broke into places and destroyed even more, and they had the attitude of; well, this stuff is already damaged, so what's the use of it now? I'm still trying to get over the fact that people could have an attitude like that. They also said that as long as the Government is laying out the money, we may as well really up the bill.

I think a lot of people take advantage of the situation that the flood presents to them. People were out to get all that they could.

All these people, little old ladies and stuff like that, are up a creek in many ways. Our house made it through the flood fairly well. It only had a couple of popped boards along with the usual sediment. It is a well-built house so it stuck-it-out. If the flood came through tomorrow, I'd say that three-quarters of the houses that have been built since the flood wouldn't make it. They are just cracker boxes. They are so shabbily built, and there was no pride at all in the work, everybody is out for the almighty dollar. I haven't seen a half-a-dozen houses that have any amount of quality work put into them. Some houses that are on a bit of land, say some houses that were owned by an elderly couple that has lived there all of their lives, and they lived in a really nice brick, or well-built frame house have had them torn down due to flood damage, and I just can't see that. It could cost them \$500 to fix up their old house, while it may cost them several thousand dollars to build a new one. They may have figured it like this: Well, if we put \$500 into our house to fix it, then we will have an old house with \$500 dollars put into it. But if there is another \$500-\$1000 put up, a whole new house can be built. I would rather have that \$500 put into the old house. Rather than have a \$1000 new house. These houses are junk as far as I'm concerned. I haven't seen any that have much of any type of quality work put into them. When we get into some of these more expensive homes, and some of them may cost 70-80 thousand dollars, and boy, that's a lot for a house. It's terrible. People are just out to see how much money they can get. GET RICH QUICK is the slogan. We were the first main complex in town, and most everyone would stop there and they would get some real supposed bargains; such as; Oh, yah, I have this miracle carpet cleaner here, and all these miracle things here, and I can rebuild all your garbage

disposalls. They would give you big promises and big talk. We must have had every single con artist and contractor and their synonyms coming in and saying; Oh, yah, we can do this and we can do that. We can put in your own sheet-rock and you won't even be able to tell that it was through the flood. You won't be able to detect any bumps or warps. Their paint is like water and it just sloshes on. Often times it comes off in the rain. On the sheet-rock, we went around and looked at some of the jobs, and you could see bumps, and they had a texture kind of stuff, like they put on ceilings, and they put that on the walls so you couldn't see all the bumps. Anytime you touched the wall, you had to wash your hand, and a large streak was left where you had touched it. When they sprayed with paint, you could see right through the paint to the wall, and all the bumps and holes and nails would be visible.

Was there any looting, that you knew about?

We went downtown the day after the flood, well, we went down that night, and we were able to drive downtown. We went down the next morning also, because my dad was rebuilding, and while we were walking down the street, we could see slide projectors laying on the sidewalk. People would be walking up and down the street, and no one would bother to pick them up. But, there were some people that came out ahead and were picking up stuff. We had all of our furniture and appliances and possessions out in the parking lot for over a month and a half and nothing turned up missing.

There were a couple of guys that were arrested for looting. They were caught thrying to steal things from a jewelry store downtown.

There good things just being thrown away. Things that were still in good order. We got a whole new set of cabinets for our kitchen. All I had to do to them was to refinish them. If I had known at the time of the flood that I was going to be refinishing this house, then there would have been several things that I could have used in the reconstruction. There were window frames, doors set in frames, and good building materials.

I saw many things wasted; things like good hardwood, stainedglass windows, and several other things that could have been saved. There were fixtures off of old doors, and windows. Just antique items that are history.

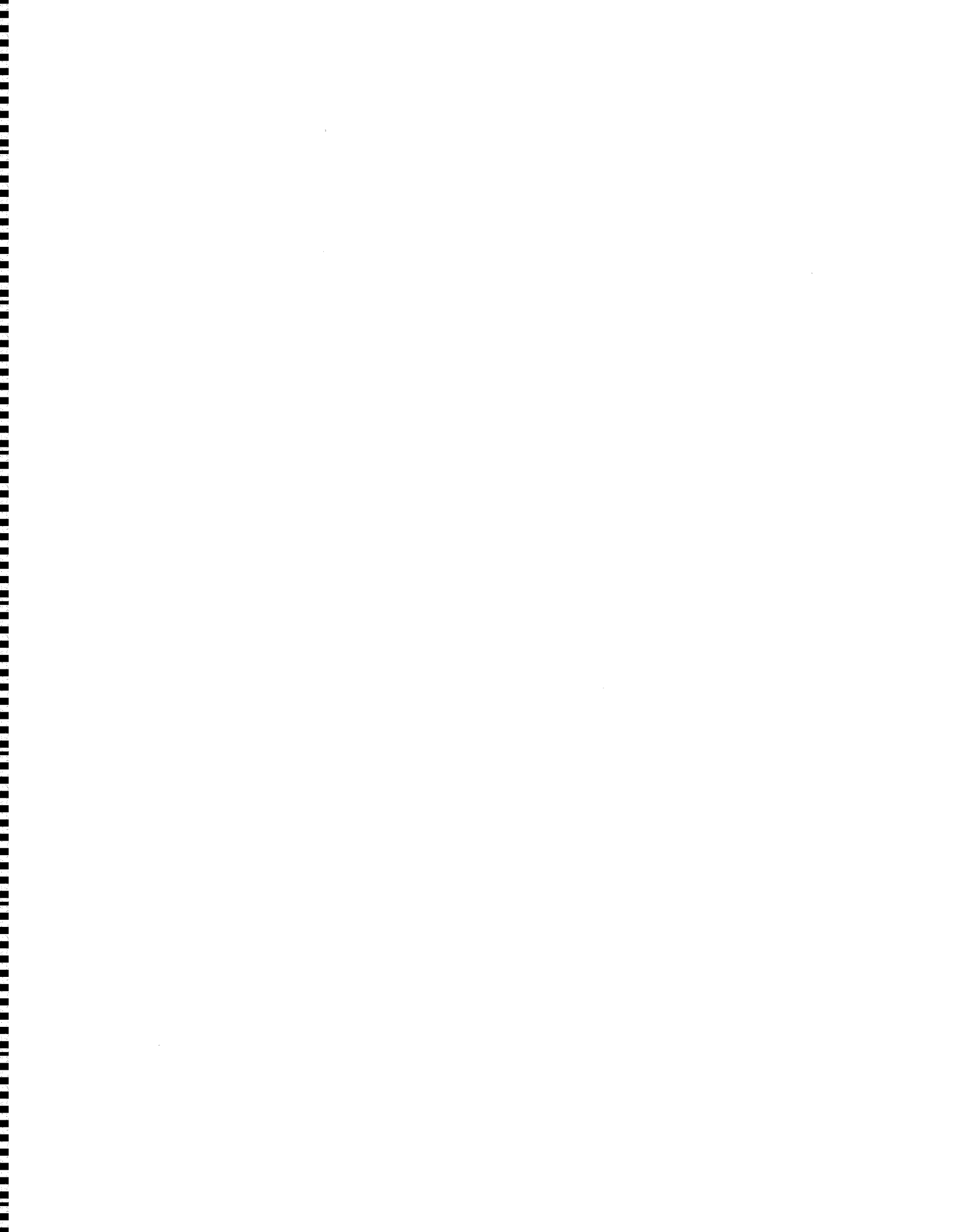
This house was up for demolition, but when we moved into it, they decided not to demolish it. It is good enough to live in; it is a fairly good house. I would rather be here, in this house, than in that trailer. They are getting some really nice houses over in St. Anthony, I was really impressed. They are getting their share of cracker-boxes and that too, but I was really impressed with some of their houses up there.

I think we could have gotten along a lot better if the Government hadn't stepped in. I think they should have let the Church handle it, and then things would have gone much better. I don't think that if the Church had handled it, then the people wouldn't have been out to get all they could.

The Bishop said that if there was anything that we needed, that we should go to him and we could get it from the Bishop's storehouse. I think that the people did that as much as possible. The Church materials and Church facilities were used as much as possible. After we had taken from the Church all that was feasible and if we were still in need, then we were to go to the Government. There is no telling how many things the Government has to support. There are tornados in the midwest, and hurricanes in the south. There are floods in the Appalations, and in the east. Later in the year, the drought out here. In Colorado after the flood there the same as here. Everyone is taking losses and the Government is paying out all this money. There's no telling when the money is going to stop, and sooner or later someone is going to take it in the shorts. After that there aren't going to be any federal funds left and I don't think the government can pay all this money everytime that a disaster occurs. After every disaster someone has to lose sometime. It shouldn't be that a disaster happens and then three days later everything is back to normal. The rebuilding of the area should be a community thing, and that people should help one another. If a diaster happens, we should feel a

disaster. It should humble us a little bit.

End of interview.



Brent Flavel

I would like my tape and a copy of
the transcript back.

Brent Flavel
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