

TETON ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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

TETON DAM DISASTER

Norma Stoddard

Interviewed by

Christina Sorensen

July 13, 1977

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY & RICKS COLLEGE

HISTORY DEPARTMENTS

COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

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

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

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, I, Norma Stoddard, 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.


Interviewee's Signature

July 13, 1977

Date

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In view of the historical and scholarly value of this information contained in the interview with Norma Stoddard, I, Christina C. Sorenson (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.

Christina C. Sorenson
Interviewer's Signature

13 July 1977
Date

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Norma Stoddard

INTERVIEWER: Christina Sorensen

DATE: July 13, 1977

TETON DAM DISASTER

C: Norma will you please spell your name?

N: Norma Stoddard.

C: Thank you. Norman, how old are you?

N: Forty-eight.

C: Where were you born?

N: St. Anthony, Idaho.

C: Where do you live now, your current address?

N: 163 West 1st North, Rexburg, Iddaho.

C: How long have you lived there?

N: Twenty-three years.

C: Now, did you own your own home prior to the flood?

N: Yes.

C: Do you own your own home now?

N: Yes.

C: Are you living at the same location?

N: Yes, we are.

C: Do you have a family?

N: Six children, four married, two teen-aged boys still at home.

C: Now, was that who was at the home at the time?

N: Right.

C: What do you do for a living?

N: I'm a receptionist-secretary at the Counseling Center at Ricks College.

C: Prior to the construction of the Teton Dam were you in favor or it or opposed to it?

N: I was very much in favor of it, I could hardly wait to get up there and start boating, and fishing, because it would be handy enough for you to go up after work, and picnic and boat.

C: So your primary interests in it were recreational?

N: Right, because we don't farm or anything. Course, I think the farmers needed it too, but my interest was just recreation.

C: Now, where were you and what were you doing the morning when you first heard the dam was breaking and what was your initial reaction to the news?

N: Well, we were just starting our vacation and we had just barely loaded the camper, and my husband was to the garage getting the car fixed and I was at home with my oldest boy and we were putting things in the camper, getting ready to leave for a couple of weeks.

C: How did you hear about it?

N: The little boy across the street, who was sixteen, called up and asked me if we were ready to go. I thought he meant vacation-wise because he runs around with my boy, and I said, "Well, we are just about ready." He said, "Well, where are you going?" and I said, "Well, we are going to start in Salt Lake." He said, "You are going that far away?" I said, "Yes, why?" He said, "Do you have your radio on?" I said, "No," and he said, "Mrs. Stoddard, you had better turn your radio on, the Teton Dam is breaking. It's going out." I said, "Oh, come on Greg." He said, "No, turn on your radio." So I went and turned on the radio and sure enough. So I got a hold of my husband at the garage and told him, and said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "Oh, I'll be home after awhile," I said, "Look I'm not just joking," I said, "You guys down there had better turn on your radio." They hadn't heard of it either, this was about, oh a little after 11:00. We were outside working so we didn't know till then.

C: What happened and what was the sequences that followed that?

N: My husband came home and we tried to decide what to do. Everything we did was wrong, but we got all the food up from downstairs, our storage was down on the kitchen floor, course we didn't think it was going to bother that, you know. We piled all the boys stereos in the basement and put on their beds and you know, things like this. Then we got our food and everything in the camper. We got extra food than what I was planning on taking and our bedding and grabbed our heavy coats, a few things just in case it was much worse than what we figured. We tied the boat up to the fence and put the bikes underneath the boat. Didn't really do too much good. We were sandbagging the basement windows and the cops came along and told us to get out of there and we still stayed till he made the loop again. He said, "You guys get out of there now, don't do another thing." My boy drove the car and we drove the camper and we went up to the Rexburg hill and watched it come in.

C: How did you feel when you were watching, what did it look like to you? Could you see your own home when the water hit?

N: No. There was a fellow up on top of one of the houses with binoculars that we knew, and he knew where we lived. He said, "It looks like about a six foot wall of water has hit the Washington School." I said, "If it's hit the Washington School then it's gotten us." He said, "Yes, your home has been hit." I said, "How bad?" He said, "Bad." But we knew when they said that there was five feet or six feet down Main Street, we were just a block from Main Street, that there was no way we could be....

C: What did the water look like to you as you watched it?

N: When we first looked up towards where it was coming in, someone standing by us said, "That is the water." Actually you didn't see the water, as such, clear up there because it was just brown dust moving in front of it until it got down in the valley and then you could see trailer houses going by.

It's not really funny, you know, because it was a disaster, but we saw a pig come down on a little tiny sheet of tin just standing there and riding the waves like he was surfing, trying to keep his balance on that thing. You saw trailer houses go booming by and houses and cars. Rick came down off the hill a little closer so we could see.

C: How did you feel as you watched all of this, did you have the feeling, at that time or during the next few days of just hopelessness or despair of what had happened?

N: Oh, not really too much. I don't know whether it was because we were in a state of shock or what, I never did feel like all was lost and there was no way to come back. So your house was hit by water and mud, I mean, you have to go on living. We were anxious to get back to see what damage had been done. We went to Archer, we have a daughter living out there. Our son-in-law came in Saturday night on his motorcycle after the water had gone down and went up to the house and in the house. He came back out and we asked him how bad it was, and he said, "Well, if I had a can of gas and a match I would have done you a favor." We knew it was bad, and he said, "I don't know whether you will ever get it cleaned up or not."

We stayed out there for two weeks and drove back and forth, but after two weeks we moved back in the house. We cleaned one bedroom upstairs to put some cots in there for our two boys to sleep and we stayed out in the camper and cooked. We were some of the lucky ones in one respect because we had water and electricity four or five days after the flood. So we did have water to wash things off with and electricity. I bought a dishwasher right off the bat because living in that kind of a mess, I felt that was one of the first thing that we needed. You can at least keep your dishes clean. We were one of the first ones to get our telephones hooked back up, so this helped.

- C: How soon were you first able to go back? When did you, yourself, and your husband first see your home and what was it like and how did you feel the first time you ever saw it?
- N: We went in Sunday afternoon. Well, you couldn't believe it, I mean, the toilet was completely full of mud and the bathtub and things like this. All the furniture was tipped upside down and the water had gone over the top of all of the beds upstairs and even the bookcases were turned over. Total disaster. I don't really know how you can describe how you felt, still, I don't really feel, as far as I'm concerned, that there was a feeling of helplessness. The main thing that you wanted to do was just do something. Even though it was Sunday, we worked. We tried to shovel out a path through. We had to get a pump to pump out the basement because the basement was full of water and that was one of our primary concerns was to find pumps to get them going and things like that.
- C: Did you do this, primarily, just your family members or did you have any outside volunteer help in the next few weeks?
- N: Yes, we have a lot of real good help, not so much people from the church, although we could have had. Harold drives a bus out to the site and the bus drivers came up day after day and brought their wives. When I finally had to go back to work, they would still bring their wives up and they would work in my house while I was at work. So mainly with us, it was family, you know, married kids, in-laws, and Harold's brothers brought tractors over and trucks. The bus drivers and their wives were so good. We really didn't need the church help. When they would ask us, we'd say, "Let them go somewhere else," because we had all the help we could use all the time.
- C: How would you assess the role that the different organizations played in the recovery operations, such as the Red Cross, and the church, and other different religious groups?

- N: I don't think anything could have been handled better. The church, of course, was right there and the Red Cross just immediately. We picked up a lot of cleaning supplies and stuff from the Red Cross and boots, rubber waders. I saved most of my clothes, but the boys where they live downstairs, their closet and everything, till we got them washed and saved what we could, we got clothes for the immediate. So that you could clean out and stuff. HUD, as far as I'm concerned, a lot of people have complained about HUD, but they couldn't have done better in my house. Very obliging and tried to do what, if you wanted something done, they would say, "Well, we aren't allowed to do that." You can understand that there has to be some guidelines, but ours was just very good to us to deliver our furniture when we finally got into the house and to pick it up and everything like that. I have no complaints about any organization, and feeding up here at the college, although we didn't eat at the college, I guess we should have and probably could have done. Where we had the camper there, we probably ate three or four meals at the college other than that we cooked in the camper. Our people were bringing in casseroles, and they would come in from Idaho Falls, the ladies they always had fried chicken or casseroles and everything like that. So we didn't really eat at the college, only about three or four times, people were excellent.
- C: Of all the personal possessions that were damaged in your home or that you lost, was there any one thing or one type of thing that you lost that you felt most bad about that was irreplaceable to you?
- N: I think it would probably have to be some of our books and my Book of Remembrance that I had made for all my kids. Mine was about six or eight inches thick with wedding pictures and life histories. Then while my two oldest boys were on their mission I had, just for Christmas gotten on the ball for a change, and got them a leather bound book and had all their missionary letters put in it

so they could go back and read the letters that they had wrote to us to see what they had done that day. I had them all engraved and ready for their Christmas presents. We lost a lot of family records, and pictures that you can't replace. Furniture you can replace, but pictures of the kids from babyhood and your grandkids. I lost my wedding ring. I felt bad about that. There was one good thing about the flood, we did lose our old garage. I've been wanting to get rid of it for five years and the flood finally did it for me without any argument from my husband. That's about the only good thing that flood did as far as I'm concerned. It got rid of my old garage that I've hated for so many years.

C: In talking about some of the things that happened to you immediately after the flood, some people have talked about incidents such as looting and things such as this. Did you know of anything like this happening in your area, your neighborhood?

N: No, not really. I knew the boy and some of his friends that were sent to the pen for their looting of the jewelry stores, because they lived in our ward, and til about a year ago they lived around the corner. I knew that they were up for that and convicted and put in the pen. He was just released about a week ago. So I'm sure that was going on and I know that they were cautious because when we were out in Archer going back and forth with our pcikup, the state patrol man would stop us a lot of times to check what you were taking out and bringing in, they didn't care as much what you were bringing in. It was a little bad that way because our son-in-law would come in with his pickup and we would send stuff out of the house. It was quite a hassle for him to get through the line with some of our stuff. They had a brick schoolhouse on their place and what we thought we could salvage, we just took out there and stored. I'm sure there was looting going on, but i guess that's human nature when disaster happen, you always get a little bit of that kind of stuff, it's too bad.

- C: How do you feel about the kind of work that is going on now? There is a lot of building going on in Rexburg, and outside contractors, and subcontractors and things such as this coming in. There had been some talk about people being taken advantage of, shabby work being done and things such as this, do you think this is true?
- N: I'm sure it probably is, I know some of the people, friends you talk to made the statement. We have done most of our work in our own home, and so personally I can't agree or disagree with it. Our two boys that live in Salt Lake, that are married, are carpenters, like in contracting. So we have done our own paneling, and doors, and everything like that, that we could, to get by so that we could replace it like we wanted it. We felt like it would save us money in the long run if we did it ourselves.
- C: How do you feel about the filing of your claims with the government, do you feel that your settlement has been fair?
- N: Yes, they were really good to us, no squabble with the verifier when he came. He questioned my wedding rings, wanted to know why I didn't have them on. I said that they were so thin, that I just wore them for special occasions, and they were in my jewelry box. He said, "Find, I just wanted to know, most women wear their wedding rings." But all of our records and books and everything like that, he didn't question at all. But when we did file with the BOR, there was something that I really didn't like. I don't know, maybe if we would have resubmitted it, it might have been different. But, I told you we did all the work ourselves, the paneling, and digging up, and the plastering and everything like that. I really kept good track of the work that we had put in, and the two boys and this didn't include our sons-in-law and our daughters, this was just the four that lived at home. I tried to keep real good hours, and I submitted those hours, and what we felt like. I mean, I didn't even put down six or seven dollars an hour, I put down four dollars

an hour because that was hard work, still is, and they cut that in half. I think in all the areas to cut when you are in that kind of a mess and living in it, that should never have been done. But, they were good to us in other areas. So you know, you can put up with it. We really didn't like it, but you know, other than that they were very good to us and I certainly don't have any complaints. We would have never been able to rebuild without the help of the government, without being in debt from now on, so I really feel that they were fair with us, we didn't have many complaints.

C: In itemizing claims, there has been some speculation about people filing fraudulent claims. I was wondering, without divulging any names, if you knew of people who had, in fact, filed for more than they actually had?

N: No, I really don't. I think you trust people, you kind of know and knew what they had and what they're building back were probably pretty accurate. I don't think you really know people's circumstances, because a lot of places when you look and see them building all these beautiful homes, you think, wow, but you don't really know what they lost. So, personally, I don't know of any.

C: As you have watched over the last year, Rexburg recovering and being rebuilt, do you feel that they are doing as well as they could? What good things do you see having coming out of this for the community, and what negative things do you think it has done for or to Rexburg?

N: Well, I think some of the positive things is that it has updated most of the stores and most of the homes. Rexburg will look like quite modern, up to date, city when everything is done. Now they are putting in malls, and all this kind of stuff. I think it is giving people a chance that really didn't have nice homes, a lot of them, to better themselves. When you have to replace it, it looks better and it is better. I think even with stores, you know that have updated, and upgraded. New curbs and sidewalks that were

washed out and roads. Course, then you go to the negative and we've lost a lot of farm land and that will probably never be able to be replaced. And then, I think it has been brought in a certain amount of riff-raff, you know, on construction. I'm not saying all construction are like that, you know, you get a certain amount of elements. I mean, Rexburg really isn't use to it, it's always been a quiet, peaceful, little community, not much going on.

C: Now that there's talk about the dam being rebuilt, how do you feel about this? If it were to be rebuilt, would you be in favor of it being rebuilt, and in the same location?

N: I'm in favor of it being rebuilt. About the same location, I'm not sure. I think a lot of study would have to go into that before they built it back where they did from everything you read about all the holes, and everything. But, as far as rebuilding the Teton Dam, I'm not against rebuilding the Teton Dam. I hope they find ways to do a little better job. I'd hate to go through it again, but I'm not against them rebuildin the dam.

C: As far as the cause of the dam break goes, some people have expressed the opinion that it was an act of divine retribution towards the area in general as opposed to the idea that it was simply a man-made disaster, how do you feel about this?

N: I think it's just been a man-made mistake. I don't think it's anybody's fault. I think it is just one of those things that happened, and I'm sure if they knew, certain things that they found out since they started to investigate, they would have corrected them in the first place.

C: As you have observed the people in your neighborhood, or in the community in general responding to the effects of the flood, have you noticed any differences, and I realize that this is a personal opinion, between the responses of Mormons and non-Mormons to what happened to them?

- N: Well, I'm not a very good one to ask that question because I know very few non-LDS people that were hit by the flood. We have a neighbor across the street that's wife died Saturday night of a heart attack, which is sad because she was a lovely lady, and I'm sure it was brought on by the flood. But, you know as far as making a difference whether or not, I just don't know that many people that aren't LDS.
- C: Do you think then, in judging the responses of the people that you do know who are LDS, do you feel that their religious faith, and even in your own case had a lot to do with how you responded to it?
- N: Oh, I'm sure it did, we've just felt like when you are trouble, you pray. Your prayers are answered one way or the other. I think our prayers were answered for the best. We've always felt like we were taken care of and even Ricks College helped us, and that's a church school. So I'm sure that having a religion helped. It kinda united everybody and you know, you were just as concerned about your neighbor and your friends as you were yourself. You didn't get much a chance to help them but, they knew you were concerned about them, you did check on them as soon as you could to make sure that things were going to be as well as could be expected with them. I'm sure our prayers were answered, and I think President Kimball's coming up and speaking to us really encouraged the people to get up and get busy and right the wrong as fast as possible.
- C: In looking back over this whole experience, Norma, have you noticed any particular ways which this whole thing has affected you, say in the sense as changing maybe any values or attitudes that you had, or bringing certain things to your attention, maybe changing your personality in any way at all?
- N: Oh, I don't think it's changed my personality. But I think people that were hit by the flood realized, of course I'm talking for me, but everything can be taken so quick. As long as you still have a family, and people that you

care about and care about you, you still have a lot. Our house was ruined and we had no place to go. We went out to our daughters, she put up with us for two weeks and did all the washing. We would take clothes out, and our sons-in-law came over and worked and shoveled and the family came with trucks to dig out. Really, you didn't lose everything just because you went through the flood, you found out really what's important to you.

C: I can't think of any more specific questions that I have Norma, is there anything that you would like to say at this point or any other thoughts or feelings that you would like to express?

N: I don't know, this is probably the wrong attitude, but I would hate to go through it again. But it has been quite an experience to go through once. A lot of people don't have a chance to go through a disaster and come out of it as well as we have. If it would have been an earthquake, the government couldn't have helped us like this, and so I think that we have really been blessed in the long run.

C: Thank you very much.

N: You bet.