The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Norman J. Gage – Life during the Teton Flood

By Norman J. Gage

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Box 6 Folder 19

Oral Interview conducted by Richard Stallings

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin June 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
RS: Norman, would you please spell your full name?


RS: Where were you born?

NG: I was born east of Monticello, Utah, in a location called Horse Head. It has been since named Eastland.

RS: How long have you lived in the Rexburg area?

NG: I came in 1968 as a teacher at Ricks College.

RS: How old are you?

NG: I’m thirty-eight years old.

RS: Do you have a family?

NG: Yes, I have six children.

RS: What’s their age range?

MG: My oldest daughter is now thirteen years old and my youngest, who is a son, will be two years in December.

RS: What’s your address?

MG: Box 4, Sugar City, Idaho.

RS: Is this the same place you were living in prior to the flood?

NG: Yes, it is.

RS: You had essentially the same family then?

NG: Yes, I did.

RS: No additions?

NG: No.

RS: Do you own your own home?

NG: Yes, I own it.
RS: Are you involved in any other activity such as farming or business?

NG: I do carpenter work during the summer.

RS: When they began seriously constructing the dam, there was a certain amount of opposition that developed. Were you aware of the opposition?

NG: Yes, I was quite aware. Many of my neighbors were very involved in voicing their opinions because many of them were farmers as well as professional people. So I was quite aware of the opposition.

RS: Did you have a position at that point?

NG: Yes, not what I’d call a real strong position, but I did take a stand on it.

RS: Were you in favor of it?

NG: Yes.

RS: Any basic reasons?

NG: I felt that it would be good for the area. I felt that it would be beneficial to many of my neighbors for additional irrigation water for their crops. In addition to that, I like the outdoors and I like fishing and hunting and I felt that in all likelihood, there would be fishing that would be made more accessible to the general public than it had been in the past. Although I was a little bit torn on this point because I enjoyed fishing the upper part of the Teton River, which was eventually done away with the reservoir.

RS: Did you follow the construction of the dam at all?

NG: Somewhat. Yes, I’ve worked on construction. I was involved in the construction of the Starvation Tunnel down in Utah near Vernal and Roosevelt and that area. Because of that I did have a little more interest in the actual construction than some people.

RS: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the disaster?

NG: I guess the only thing that would fit under the category would be one evening, one night, I had a dream. I guess you know I do write some poetry and I wrote in poetic form of the experience. I gave a copy of this to one of our colleagues, Dorla Jenkins, to read. We read it together. It was a poem describing extensive disaster, personal involvement, and so on. In fact, it was kind of interesting because I was in a position of some official capacity it seemed, in at least two instances in the dream. As it revealed in the poem, one was a church responsibility, which I held at the time and the other was a civil responsibility, which I didn’t hold until shortly after the collapse of the dam when I was appointed to a city responsibility. I read the poem after I had finished writing it and to be truthful, I didn’t know what it was talking about. It was [not] until sometime after the
collapse of the dam, in fact, some months after that I finally recognized what it was talking about and what I had written and what had actually occurred.

RS: I’d like to have a copy of it.

NG: It’s gone; I don’t know where it is.

RS: Did you lose it?

NG: I’ve looked and looked and gone through all of my files. Dorla doesn’t have a copy of it, either.

RS: Where were you and your family when the dam broke?

NG: I was at my office here in the COB building on campus. I was taking care of some correspondence relative to the honors program, and my family was all home in Sugar City. I had planned on taking my four oldest children fishing. I had promised them I would take them that day. We had thought some about going in the morning and then we decided that we’d like to take care of these things in my office first and then we wouldn’t have to hurry home from the river. I wouldn’t be pressed for any responsibility to take us home. We had planned on going to the bridge just outside of Newdale beyond the Teton. I guess it was fortunate that I had these pressing things in my office. They were home. My wife told me about it. She was the one that told me about it.

RS: She’s the one that found out about it and called you?

NG: She didn’t call me. When the word came, there was almost a hysteria that accompanied it, at least a real urgency in the instructions to leave. President Sonderegger who lived directly behind me came over and instructed my wife to leave immediately. She did. She gathered the children and came immediately to the college here. She came upstairs and told me what had happened. I returned back to Sugar City.

RS: What was your reaction, do you remember?

NG: Yes, I do remember. I heard her come down the hall. I immediately knew it was her and something very, very bad had happened. I didn’t know what it was. I jumped up from my chair and opened the door. She came around the corner and said, “The dam broke.” I believed her immediately. I don’t know the word, I don’t know if there is a word to describe how I felt. There was a hollow feeling. Something I guess akin to a good, stout blow to the mid-section. All the spiritual air, it seemed, went immediately out of me. It just left me for a second. I asked about the children and asked her what she had gotten from home. I found out that she hadn’t picked up much, very little, just the kids. I told her that I would go back and see if there was anything I could do. At that time, we didn’t think it would be much.

RS: What did you anticipate?
NG: We didn’t think there would be nearly the volume of water that came through there. I recall joking, just a few days prior to the dam breaking, joking with Blair Pincock who builds homes with me. We would say to one another, “If the dam ever breaks, good-bye valley.” He lives right on the river. I told him, “You’ll have ten feet of water going over you.” Even in those conversations we had never anticipated that much water, maybe two or three feet of water. I felt quite seriously of staying in the home. As it turned out, I would have been safe doing so because my home stayed. I thought what I could do was to carry some things up out of our storage area downstairs and take care of some of our things, which I did.

RS: What time was it when your wife came up?

NG: Just shortly after noon. As I recall, it was close to 12:30. I don’t remember exactly what time it was, but shortly before she came I looked at my watch and it was seven after twelve. I remember the time simply because I promised my kids I would be home about noon, and I was running a little bit late so I was rushing out of there. It was shortly after twelve.

RS: You left the college and drove back to Sugar City?

NG: Yes.

RS: Did you have any trouble getting back out there?

NG: My wife told me that there were roadblocks that were set up and were not allowing anyone back in on the highway. I went up around the farm roads. I didn’t have any trouble. I understood that shortly after I went back that they set roadblocks up over the roads that I took. Had I been a few minutes later I wouldn’t have been able to get back in.

RS: When you pulled back into Sugar City, was there anybody else in the community at that point?

NG: There weren’t any dogs or birds; there was nothing that I could see when I first drove in. There were doors that were open in some of the homes where people had left so quickly. After I had been there for a time, I became aware that a neighbor from across the street was still there, Don Packer. He was undecided as to what to do. He was there without a car. He asked me what we should do. I said, “The first thing is to carry these things up.” He began to arrange things in his own home. I did the same. I went downstairs and brought a number of items, our food primarily, and carried all the food storage that we had aside from the bottled things and some large fifty-five gallon drums of wheat. I carried them up and a number of appliances, rifles, some things like that, clothing that I could pick up immediately and carried it upstairs. I went over to my neighbors’ homes and shut off the power supply in their homes and carried up their food supplies out of their downstairs areas and set food stuff on top of the cabinets and
refrigerators. One neighbor had a two-story home, and I carried all of the things I could. He’s been to Europe a number of times, so I paid special attention to his antique clocks and things of that nature, stereo and things like that. I carried up all that I could. After I had been there for a time, I lost track of time. I was rushed and hurried and was trying to organize things. I had the radio on, of course, and I could hear Don Ellis yelling in the microphone and that did give me a sense of urgency. Every once in a while Brother Packer would come over and say, “What will we do?” I would say, “Let’s keep working and get all we can up in the neighborhood here.” He suggested a couple of things to me. He said, “Better run some water in some sinks and bathtubs in case we’re left without water for a day or two.” I did that and then I gathered a box of groceries and bottles and milk and a change of clothes for the children together and some sleeping bags and pillows and put those things in the back of the pickup so I’d have them in time to leave. I anticipated that the water would be coming pretty well from the east. It didn’t, it came from the northeast. Don came over after I had been doing these things and said again, “What do you think? Shall we stay or leave?” I don’t know exactly what time the water hit Sugar City, but this was about two or three minutes before it actually hit because we talked for a moment and then we walked out on my porch and as we were talking there, Don turned around and looked and about one hundred and fifty yards away was the water. He said, “There it is.” I made up my mind when I looked at the water. It appeared to be a wave of about six feet high, and I could see the rubble rolling at the crest of the wave and there was a little dust that preceded the wave. So I told him, “Get in the pickup.” I went out and turned the power off in my own home and locked the doors. We drove out just immediately ahead of the water. The highway patrolmen had been going up and down the streets drove out right behind us. I understand that I was the last one out of Sugar City. There were some, you know, who stayed. I guess I was the last one to actually drive out. We drove out and drove back to Rexburg. By then we knew it was far more serious than we ever anticipated. After I arrived here at the college, I checked first with my family. And Dan Black is a close neighbor there and he had my family in the snack bar area in the Manwaring Center. I checked with them and then I went up on the hill to see if I could catch a glimpse of my home and the community out there. There was a fellow out there on top of some trucks, and I climbed up with him. He had a pair of binoculars. He very generously let me use them. It was an exciting movement for everyone. He shared his binoculars with me, but I was not able to see my home specifically, but I could see the home across the street quite vividly. I could see that the water appeared to be up within a foot of the eave of the home. From that I surmised that my home would have about three feet of water on the upper level.

RS: As you noticed the water coming, was there anything particular that stood out in your mind? Did you notice anything unusual or interesting about it?

NG: Not much more really than what I have suggested. It was terrifying. It frightened me very much. Up until that point I had been debating whether or not to stay. I guess the thing that impressed me the most was the power of the water. There was nothing behind it. It was just water behind it. It appeared to be clearing everything in its path. When we saw it, it had reached the McKenna home which didn’t leave. It is still standing, but it had reached the door on the McKenna home and it had taken his garage, which was a
cinderblock structure. I guess the power of the thing was most impressive to me. It was so large, so much larger than I had anticipated. I thought it would come much more gentle.

RS: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

NG: Yes, there were some. There were so many strange things happening, really strange things occurred. I guess the most miraculous thing was two things in connection with the home itself. Number one, we didn’t have three feet of water in the upper levels. The water had gone that high, and it was a miracle that the door held it. There was no real expensive damage upstairs. I had to take up the carpets, primarily because the water went through the basement windows and then up the stairwells with such force and such intensity that it erupted up and over on the carpets. My drapes were hanging within 3/8 of an inch of the carpets and they weren’t wet. I guess that, in and of itself, was a miracles. It is to me because of the way I feel it came about. Then I guess it was kind of a miracle that there wasn’t much structural damage on the bottom level. The water was so powerful that it literally tore the ceilings off. Sheet rock and acoustical tile that I had on the ceilings were ripped right off. The insulation between the levels was torn off. I could see the water level, and it hadn’t actually touched the sub floor. It came within a half of an inch of the sub floor. Consequently, there wasn’t much structural damage. It tore sheets of siding off the back part of my home, but it left the studs and the wall, and the bearing petition wasn’t moved. There were a couple of other petitions that had been moved several feet. But the bearing petition wasn’t moved, and the home itself wasn’t damaged. That was fantastic.

RS: As you watched the flood, did you see any animals?

NG: I didn’t, no. But I didn’t watch it very long. It was close enough that I didn’t have much time to watch it.

RS: When you got up on the hill, did you see anything there?

NG: When I got up on the hill and watched it, I didn’t see any animals, no. I understand there were a number of animals running before the flood, but by the time it got to Rexburg, the flood had gone through Sugar City and it had nearly reached Rexburg by the time I got out and began to watch. I didn’t have any binoculars of my own and with my naked eye I wasn’t able to see a great deal. I was most interested in my own community and my home out there. When I had the binoculars that’s what I focused on. After that I walked down the hill a ways down to the edge of the water and at that time I didn’t see any animals. They probably would have already gone through. I saw a house or two floating past, things of that nature, but not any animals.

RS: Where did you and your family stay during the fist few days of the flood?

NG: We had no family at all here in the valley so we made a quick decision to take the children down to Utah. During the time that I was working there on the home, it
occurred to me that my family and my wife’s family would be concerned. My wife’s family is in Orem and my parents live in Salt Lake. It occurred to me that they would be quite concerned when they heard about it on the news. I made a telephone call down and told them that the family was safe and that I was still there at home gathering things up, but that I would be out in plenty of time. I didn’t know that I didn’t have plenty of time when I called. We decided that we would take the family right down there. We loaded what we had, which was a change of clothes for the little children and some sleeping bags and pillows and food. We drove down to Salt Lake. I did have a little money with me, enough to buy gas to make our way down. That’s all we had.

RS: This was Saturday afternoon?

NG: Yes. We drove to my parents’ home there in Salt Lake and spent the night there. And the next day we drove on down to Orem and situated the children there. My children stayed there for about a month. I didn’t stay there. My wife stayed there for some of that time. It wasn’t quite a month; it was about the 29th when we came back. That Sunday afternoon, following the flood, on the 6th, which was my birthday, a brother-in-law acquired a plane and we flew up here. I was able to see the damage, at least get an overview of the damage. I saw at that time that many of my neighbors’ homes were completely gone. I was delighted to find that my own home and several of my neighbors’ homes were still standing. That, in itself, was kind of traumatic experience for me, not the worst moment of the whole thing, but it was traumatic. My wife and I came back Monday the 7th and that’s when we began the cleanup operations.

RS: What was the most traumatic experience?

NG: I suppose the moment that was really the lowest was when we came up maybe on the 14th I guess, which was a Sunday. My wife came up with me and then the next day her father and my father came up. The next day her brother and brother-in-law and my own brother and one of his friends came up and began to help me clean things up. We worked all that week. The four young men and I worked all that week. My father left on a Wednesday to go back down and get some supplies for me. At that time, I didn’t know that there were going to be things available for me. He went down and picked some things up. He bought some wheelbarrows and several things, a pump, and my wife went home with her father for a day or two. I could see that there really wasn’t much for her to do that she could help me with at that moment. I did have several men there. I was concerned that she would overwork herself, which she began to do. Immediately, as we got home, she began to work. I sent her home with her father and then my father went down and got some supplies. That Saturday my brothers left, all of them and the young men who were working. I had been staying there in my home. I guess I was the only one that was in Sugar City. That Sunday afternoon, after the meeting with President Kimball and Elder Packer, I went back and I guess it was the idleness, there was nothing to do. I had no books to read, I had nothing to do. In fact, there was another breakage in the dike at that time and there was water going across the highway, and they had set up another roadblock. In fact, I defied a policeman’s order to get back into Sugar City. He said, “You can’t go.” I said, “What will you do if I do, shoot me?” He kind of chuckled so I
left. He couldn’t say go ahead. He didn’t do anything. We both understood. With his approval I got in there. That was the only way I could get back in after I had attended the meeting. I was really cut off. I couldn’t get out and couldn’t go anywhere. There was nothing there. I was idle for a number of hours, and there was nothing to do but just look out at the destruction. I decided that I would call my wife and visit with her. I needed my family then. I never felt so alone in my entire life. I place a phone call to her and she wasn’t there. I called my folks. The telephone rang and my dad answered, and I grunted enough to let him know that I was me. As I looked out across the town there was just absolute destruction. I couldn’t say a word for several minutes. Finally, I was able to get control of my emotions and visit with him. That was definitely a low point. That was the only point I guess. From that point on, I threw myself into work. There was so much abandonment. I guess I abandoned my good sense in the process and I never felt it again so much. I felt abandoned.

RS: You returned to your property the following Monday then?

NG: Yes.

RS: What was your reaction as you drove through Rexburg and Sugar City to get out to your property?

NG: I had seen the flooded area from the air and had flown within probably one hundred feet of it, but I was still unprepared. I was shocked. To get right down in the midst of it and to see the real details of the destruction was shocking and heartbreaking. It really was. I drove into my own driveway and the garage was torn off and the garage door. I don’t know, it had done it, but it had somehow became entangled with a lot of limbs and trees and was sitting up on my front steps, which was against the current. We got out and looked at it. This was the first time my wife had seen it. I was mostly concerned at that moment with comforting her. It really wasn’t necessary for more than just a moment. She showed tremendous strength there. We were shocked and somewhat dismayed. We crawled over the rubbish to get into the home and unlocked the door. Before we opened the door, we were apprehensive as to what we might find. When we opened the door, we were relieved and grateful because things were like I had left them. The upstairs floor was wet, and we did have to replace the carpets, but we didn’t have to do anything upstairs.

RS: Most of the stuff that you carried up and put on the counters and tables survived?

NG: Yes, in my own home. We walked around the home and through the water. The water at that time was still running through the streets and between me and my neighbor on the south. There was a good two feet of water that was running. The water had knocked all the porches off or loose. The front porch was still intact but the side porch that went into the garage was completely gone. The back porch had been torn loose from the house, and we weren’t able to get in that way. We looked around the house and looked downstairs. We didn’t go into the water at that moment. We saw what had happened down there, and it was pretty bad. We went around the house and we found
some funny things. We found in one place where the siding in the back had been torn loose, and there was a spool of thread that was back in there all dry and nice. My axe was still leaning against the house in the garage where it had been before. I don’t know how it escaped, but it did. There were some interesting things like that. We found large pieces of brick walls from the garage that were spread nearly half a block. They were pieces of brick that were two by four. There was one piece, I guess the largest piece that was nearly eight feet long and nearly four feet wide, and the water had floated away. There were many pieces of brick that were buried in the garden and the lawn area. I guess our dominant feeling after we had surveyed this was gratitude, thanksgiving. We still had what we had.

RS: Do you remember thinking anything about the community? Would it be rebuilt?

NG: Yes, in fact we talked about that. As we drove in, we never had any inclination at all that people would leave. There was never any doubt in our minds that people wouldn’t rebuild. We never even considered leaving at all. It never entered our minds. In fact, we were a little bit amazed when people would ask us if we were going to stay. This was a supposed conclusions I think on the part of ourselves and most people that we would all stay, and we would all begin again. There was never any other feeling that I detected.

RS: You know that some of the homes were completely destroyed and washed away. What did you think about in regards to those people?

NG: Well, here again my feelings were a little mixed. In a way it appeared to be a blessing if the home were unrepairable. It seemed to be better for the home to be completely gone. Yet, we really felt deeply for some of these people because it was bad enough for us to come back and see something that remained. For some of our neighbors to come back and see absolutely nothing but a hole and foundation where their homes had been was difficult for us all. It was initially more difficult. We felt a good deal for those people. There were a number of our neighbors here whose homes were completely gone. Out of the twelve or thirteen homes that we considered our immediate neighborhood, about half were completely gone. It was shocking. I guess for us it was a testimony of tremendous power and force of the water. It was shocking. I think, though we didn’t realized it then, we probably were in a state of—I don’t want to say shock, necessarily, but almost disbelief of what it could do and what had happened. This was our little town, and it seemed to be the most secure place in the world for us. It certainly was in every other way, spiritually and socially. We felt almost absolute security there. Then to come back and see it gone, it was shocking. We couldn’t imagine that happening to our town. We handled it, but we would have preferred not to have had to handle it.

RS: You mentioned your basement was full of water. Had your basement had been finished?

NG: There was a portion of the basement that was finished. We had two or three rooms that were finished down there. We salvaged nothing from the basement.
RS: What was the most cherished item that you lost?

NG: That would be difficult to say. I had a number of things that were very dear to me down there. I really regret having lost them. Primary amount those things would have to be my missionary trunk in which I had many mementos from my mission. I have a sister that we lost a few years ago, and I had my only pictures of her there. Early family portraits and things of this nature were gone. I had my total collection of books, they were taken of course. The family things are the things I miss most of all. My scriptures were upstairs and we didn’t lose them.

RS: How did you go about cleaning up?

NG: We arrived on the afternoon of the 7th and after we unloaded the supplies we brought with us, we brought drinking water and hip boots, things like that. After we had been there twenty minutes or so, I dawned on my hip boots and went down and investigated to see how high the mud was. My wife put on a pair of boots too, and we began to pick up the solid objects that we could. The windows were broken out and so there was no problem there. We could throw things out of doors. I took out the stiles between the window panes so that we had the full five feet through which to throw things. We began throwing things out. We had a desk and quite a bit of furniture down there. I was a little shocked. I’d grab a hold of some of that furniture and begin to lift it out by a leg and it would come out in my hand. It was all debris. It would come apart. We began doing that kind of thing. We had a number of beds. We had several beds because we had been on the watch for mattresses and box springs because we knew eventually we would finish another bedroom down there, and we would put some more of our children down there. We had twin beds for my daughters and then we had a couple of more beds and a guest bed down there. We had a lot of beds. We began to try to move some of those things. Actually, my wife and I did pick up one box springs and take it out and put it outside. It amazed me that a couple of days later we had some of the volunteers came through, and it took five of them to move one. My wife and I did it alone. I guess we began with a certain determination that we were going to clean it up. We went about doing that. There wasn’t much we could do with the mud at that point. We didn’t have shovels or equipment.

RS: Where did you stay those first couple of nights?

NG: We stayed in our home. We stayed there, my wife and I.

RS: How was that experience? Was it unusual?

NG: It was different. We felt a great dependence on one another and a closeness that we’d seldom felt, a greater reliance on God than we had ever felt. These were some of the feelings that I could recall later on when I was alone and quite depressed and feeling the disparity of the situation, which gave me strength.
RS: What were some of the problems that you found frustrating in the cleanup?

NG: I couldn’t tell I was doing anything. We began working as soon as light would allow it. It seems like we would work for an entire day, 12 to 13 hours as hard as we could. While my wife was there, we would stop and get something to eat. We’d go over to the school for lunch and supper, and then come back and usually I would work again. I and one or two of the others, they kind of rotated and worked with me after supper. I would usually work until it was dark and I couldn’t see. After it was all over it would seem like nothing had been done. For the first week there was some frustration there. One of the things that frustrated me personally, I guess this was the only intense anger or—I don’t want to say hatred—but hostility that I felt was during the first week when we were working and the stories came that certain people in the Bureau of Reclamation that were associated with the dam were aware that there was a good possibility that the dam would break. One of our neighbors there was acquainted with one of the foreman or supervisor of some nature there at the dam and he indicated that he hadn’t been able to sleep for a week for fear that it was going to break. To think that they had not told us so that we could make preparations in case it did break! These things angered me a good deal, just the apparent vanity and pride of the officials out there. I say apparent because now I don’t know if that was the case at the time. I felt real hostility toward Mr. Robinson. Having worked in the construction earlier, I had the opinion, and I still do frankly, that the supervisor is responsible for the job. The superintendent is responsible. If it isn’t being built properly, then the responsibility comes back to him. I have no hard feelings towards him now, but at the time I would have soon shot him as look at him. It was a time when there were unnatural feelings, a time when we would go against what had become accepted as our basic natures, as our basic personalities in some instances. But I saw very little of that. I talked to a few people, and they didn’t voice this. And I didn’t voice it at the time, except to people who were very close to me there, my own family. Of course they recognized that there was some anger born out of the frustration of seeing the endlessness of the job that was before us. It seemed overwhelming.

RS: You mentioned you received family help for that first week in the cleanup. Did you receive any other help?

NG: During the first week, no. Not that there wasn’t help offered to me. But I did have four young men who were strong, and they worked hard and helped me a great deal. There were others who didn’t have that many people there, so on some occasions I was offered help, and I indicated that there were others in the neighborhood who needed it worse than I. The first week there was one day that we did have some people come by who had been helping in the other area and saw that we were working alone. There were two men from Teton who came over and assisted. Then the next week there were a number of people who came over and assisted. Then the next week there were a number of people who came. There were people who helped me at least half of my working day. I would put in two or three hours before they arrived and after they left I would work some more by myself. The people from Iona Stake were the ones that were assigned to our ward. They were there everyday, and I had four or five people almost every day that came in to help me.
RS: Until you got the place cleaned up?

NG: It was pretty well until I got it cleaned up. The second week my father came back up and by that time I had been able to obtain some building supplies and we, my dad and I, had begun reconstruction on my garage. I don’t remember exactly how it went, but I remember the point at which I received help. The last help that I received was sheet rocking some areas in my basement. That would have been after I brought my family back. My father was here at that time and help me build. I received a lot of help from people. When I could do it myself, I did. When I had my own family there I did not accept other help because I was in a little different situation because my experiences had prepared me for this in terms of building and these kinds of things. When the skilled people came in I didn’t accept help because there were other people that needed it worse than I did simply because they didn’t know how to do it. I did know how to do it so I just went ahead and did the bulk of it myself. It wasn’t a point of being gracious or anything like that or being too proud to receive the help because we soon learned that you had to rely on the church.

RS: Did this bother you to receive this help when people came in?

NG: For a time it did. I’ve never, like most people in the valley, received any kind of assistance of this nature. The thing that bothered me the most was going and eating at the college. This bothered me. I didn’t do it after the first week. When my father brought back these supplies, I ate at home when I ate. There were cans of things, beans and tuna fish. There were a couple of hot dogs and things like that, and I gathered wood and cooked on my fireplace rather than going over and eating. After my wife left, I quit going over there. There was only one other time that we went over when there were four fellows with me, and we did go over and eat a meal. We showered and cleaned up a little bit, also. Other than that I didn’t receive any help at all until later on when the Bishop asked me if I had been to the store house and I told him, “I haven’t.” He said, “Go.” It was pretty direct instructions. We lived in the college housing for five weeks. During the first two or three weeks, we did receive some things from the storehouse. It bothered me in a way, but in a way it didn’t bother me. Ever since I can remember I’ve worked on the church farm, and so I don’t know if it was rationalization or not, but in that way I could justify in my own mind the acceptance of things because I felt like I had contributed some things to other people in the past. I felt like maybe it was kind of paying my way.

RS: When your family came back up, you moved into the college housing rather than keeping them out there?

NG: Yes, my homes didn’t have the facilities for keeping the family out there, and I didn’t stay out there. We got an apartment in the girls’ dorms up here, and that’s where we lived for five weeks. Then the trailer house came, and we lived in the trailer hours for about nine weeks. It was just about a year ago that we moved back into our house.
RS: So you were out of your home about three months?

NG: Something like that. I had it entirely repaired before we moved back in.

RS: Did you have any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

NG: The most uplifting experience I can think of was being there and seeing those people come in and help. There was nothing better than that. Whether we accepted the help or not, just to see them come and to have them and see them and to know that they were there and they cared the much; it was an experience that is still overwhelming to me. We got closer as a family. As neighbors we had always been close, but I think maybe we had opportunity to show this closeness and to verify it by helping.

RS: Did you suffer any vandalism or looting or any other forms of lawlessness?

NG: We didn’t have a bit. Not in my neighborhood. We were worried about that in a way, but security was good and as you know, there was a curfew there in Sugar City, an 8:00 pm curfew. Of course, the officials know that I was staying there, but I still honored the curfew as best I cold. With few exceptions was I ever out of my home after 8:00 pm except right there in the yard maybe carrying some things out or something of that nature. But we didn’t have any loss of a good.

RS: Did you receive any assistance from Red Cross or any other private organizations?

NG: Yes, we received some clothes from the Red Cross. The girls lost all of their clothes so we bought some clothes from them with funds from the Red Cross, not really much. We bought them each a pair of shoes and a couple of clothes.

RS: Did you see the bishop’s storehouse at all other than for cleaning supplies?

NG: We did get some food stuff from the bishop’s storehouse when we were living at the dorms. We found after that time that people had given us money, and so we just lived on that. Being an employee of the college, my check continued to come, so we lived on that. We didn’t feel the need for it. Had we not had income, I’m sure we would have used it. When the Bishop quit telling us to go we did.

RS: Which government agencies did you deal with during this recovery?

NG: Small Business and the Bureau of Reclamation officials.

RS: How would you evaluate their effectiveness?

NG: I felt good about the way they preformed. People with the government agencies seemed very sympathtic and very desirous of helping us and very open and honest and cooperative in many ways as far as I could personally tell. My association with them left
really nothing to be desired. They were considerate of me and cooperative and wanted to help me. They were very sincere, I think.

RS: Did you deal with any state or local authorities during the recovery operations?

NG: Not really, Church authorities, just church.

RS: Do you feel that any who assisted in the recovery might have taken advantage of either you or the government?

NG: I think that there were some. There were some companies who moved in who would have classed as opportunists. They charged more than what their labor was worth. The government paid it, of course, so maybe in a way you can’t blame them, but I didn’t feel good about it. There were some people who did take advantage of them. Some companies I should say, I don’t want to say individuals necessarily. Of course, companies are made up individuals, but I think there were come who did take advantage, primarily financial advantage.

RS: Without divulging names, were you aware of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

NG: I wasn’t, I don’t know of anyone. The only thing I know is what I read in the papers.

RS: Did you feel like the flood was some type of punishment or test the Lord gave or was it natural or a man-made disaster?

NG: Certainly it was a man-made disaster. I wouldn’t want to divorce some supernatural influences from it either. I feel definitely that there was some. I guess if I were going to evaluate the Lord’s part in it, I would have to say he recognizes that man has free agency because He gave that to us. Number one, every man has the title to act within the realm of his own agency. That’s just what the Bureau of Reclamation did. I suspect the Lord looked down, and I think He likes good workmanship, and so He was a little disappointed and I think, if anything. He held things up so we could get out. It was a good compliment from Him. Maybe I’m a little bit egotistical in this, but I don’t know of a group of people anyway in the entire world that could stand this better, this kind of a disaster better, with better faith and better courage and better strength than the people here in this valley.

RS: They certainly recovered very rapidly.

NG: I’ll say they did. There was no thought of giving up on the part of any of them that I ever witnessed. There was nothing but strength, determination, courage and absolute dedication to recovery. The people that I associated with were like this.

RS: Do you think the dam ought to be rebuilt?
NG: Yes, I think that we need a dam. I don’t think we need one that big. I think we could accomplish the same thing with a smaller dam or perhaps a couple of smaller dams. I still think we need the dam, yes. If you would ask me if I would vote for it to be rebuilt, I’m not sure that I would vote consistently with what I said. It was an experience that had depth that I think that we haven’t yet really experienced. The influence of this experience is going to be with us a long while. I think we are afraid of it. You will recall that shortly after the dam broke, that they put a little check there underneath where the dam was, and there was some rumor that this check was going to break, and it would cover the Sugar area with water again. Some people, many of them were just absolutely terrified. People who had exhibited nothing but strength and courage were almost sent into hysterics. Some were almost in hysterics that there was going to be another flood. I think the people are very much afraid of it.

RS: Has the disaster changed your life?

NG: Yes, it has. It was a very intense, traumatic experience. I think that I look at things somewhat differently than I did before. I’ll give you an example. When I was gathering things up from the basement, there was a table lamp that had been given to us for a wedding present. It wasn’t one that we were using much except we had a bed back there and on occasion people would stay with us and they would use it. As I was hurrying around picking up sleeping bags, I knocked the lamp off the table and broke it. I remember thinking “Oh why did I do that?” I hated to do that. I was thinking, “You are not clever and not very coordinated, certainly not very careful.” It was a little thing and as I look at material things now, I see them in quite a different perspective than I did then. I really believe now, and I guess I said this before, but I really believe it now, that when all of the early possessions that you have are taken from you, then you see what you have left and that’s what really matters. That’s the only thing that has ultimate value. As I said, I said those words before, but I think that maybe the most far reaching influence that the flood has had on my life is to make me really believe that Mormonism is true.

RS: How is your family now, have they recovered pretty well from it or are there still after effects?

NG: I never really saw any negative effects on my family, my children I’m speaking of. My wife’s experience would parallel mine to quite an extent in terms of the emotional and spiritual trauma of the situation. My children took turns helping me working out there in some of the cleanup. You remember they were in Utah for three weeks or so following the flood, nearly four weeks. They didn’t see some of the worst parts of it. Certainly they did see the effect it had on the home, and they couldn’t help but see many of our neighbors’ homes were gone. I didn’t feel that they were affected adversely to that experience. They handled it very well.

RS: How’s the community now, is it back together? Pre-flood attitudes there again?
NG: I don’t think the community was ever apart. There was an adhesive quality in the relationship of the members of the community. It tightened immediately, strengthened immediately. You never saw a laxity, a separation or falling apart of the community as a whole. Certainly we were disorganized for a time. But immediately after people were able to get in and begin their cleanup procedures, we held meetings. Of course, they were under the leadership of the Bishop. He was the presiding authority, of course. The mayor and city council were involved in conveying information. All in all, there was a tremendous unified effort. Every individual seemed to be concerned about every other individual. Not having lived in a community for a long period of time, I didn’t know everyone real well. I still don’t know them real well, but I certainly know them better. I appreciate them more than I did before. I think most of the people could relate stories similar to that.

RS: Have you noticed many changes since the many places are complete now and people are returning to normal lives?

NG: Yes, many people have moved into their new homes, rebuilt homes, repaired homes. In fact, the majority of the people are back in again, after just over a year. I think their attitudes are more grounded on religious things, a little bit more than they were before. I think there is a greater consideration that most people have for their neighbors than what they had before. This is only logical, this is no miracle because when an individual invests some of his time and effort into his neighbor’s home, and sharing labor, one naturally has a tendency to appreciate his neighbor more. The best part of you is in something you are concerned with. It’s a natural kind of outgrowth, I think I saw things as they really were, many of us, for the first time. We saw the real church in action for the first time. We saw how it was to work within the confines of the welfare program for the first time. There is a giving and taking there. One is just as sacred as the other, and we learned this quickly. It’s been a great experience for us. It’s been a refining experience for us. It’s one that I think any of us would say, “Boy, I wish it hadn’t happened.” I see people with beautiful big new homes when they didn’t have quite that good of a home before. Square footage perhaps was equitable but the amenities of the home were not as nice, not as extensive or luxurious. I think these people say in all honesty that they would prefer that the flood hadn’t happened. Yet, I think that some of the spin-offs in the society, the town and the attitudes of the spirit of the people both collectively and individually have been enhanced from their experience with the flood.

RS: Thank you Mr. Gage.