

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Orrin Raymon Bates – Life during the Teton Flood

By Orrin Raymon Bates

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Box 5 Folder 14

Oral Interview conducted by David Crowder

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin —April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

David Crowder: Orrin, would you please spell your name?

Orrin Raymon Bates: Orrin Raymon Bates.

DC: What is your present address?

OB: 328 West Main.

DC: Is that where you were living when the flood hit?

OB: Yes.

DC: How many members are in your family?

OB: Five.

DC: Were they all at home at that time?

OB: Three were and a son was living in the apartments at Dean Rick's on 3rd West.

DC: Did he get washed out?

OB: Yes, he was in the basement.

DC: Where was your other child?

OB: She is married and living in Provo. One of our boys had gone to the legislature, Boy's State, and he was just coming back when he heard about the flood.

DC: How long have you lived in this area?

OB: Since 1962. About fifteen years.

DC: What do you do for a living?

OB: Teach at Ricks College.

DC: Did you own the home in which you were living?

OB: Yes, we were buying it.

DC: Did you get involved in any way in any of the debate over the building of the dam?

OB: No, I didn't get involved in it, but I was always in favor of it and supported it.

DC: Why?

OB: Because I felt like it was really needed for water, flood control and power.

DC: It seems sort of ironic now doesn't it?

OB: Yes, but I still think it's needed.

DC: Where were you on the day the flood occurred?

OB: I was here in Rexburg. I'd been going to school in Provo, but I was home for the week-end.

DC: Where were you when you first got word?

OB: We were uptown shopping.

DC: How did you receive the word that the dam had broken?

OB: We heard it right when they first announced it. I didn't get very excited about it. It didn't seem like it would amount to much.

DC: How long did it take before you realized that it would amount to much?

OB: It was about a half hour, because they kept telling about it over the radio and things progressed pretty fast once it started to go.

DC: What was your reaction? Did it stay downtown?

OB: We finished at one store and then we went to the grocery store and bought some groceries which we left in the car.

DC: Did that turn out to be fortunate?

OB: Yes.

DC: Then you just went home and did what?

OB: Then we went over and warned our son, that was living over in Dean Rick's apartment, because they were in the basement and we didn't know if they'd hear about it. Then we went home and started to move things upstairs.

DC: Did you get them high enough to do any good?

OB: It did some, but not much.

DC: Did you feel when you were moving those things, that the danger was really acute?

OB: I didn't think it'd be much except maybe just flood the basement. We just moved things up on the upper floor and though they'd be okay.

DC: Where did you go then?

OB: We left and brought my son's family and the cars up to Ricks College. We went back home because we had some bicycles down there. The two boys and I moved the stuff up out of the basement, all the beds and the bedding, the drawers out of the chest of drawers, and a lot of the food.

DC: You had plenty of time to do that?

OB: Yes.

DC: You didn't feel any great urgency?

OB: No, I didn't at all. I even took a shave after we got through. I hadn't shaved that morning.

DC: Was there anything that you especially valued that you put in the car and took with you?

OB: I didn't think about that too much. I didn't really do much at all.

DC: When did you first see the flood coming across the valley?

OB: I can't remember what time it was, about 3:00, when it first came to Rexburg. We were up at the college. Coming back from home I walked and the two boys were on bicycles. We stopped and helped load some people in buses. They were in wheelchairs. I don't know if it was the Golden Living Center because they were in the Viking Motel. We were load them from there. We left and came up to the college with everybody else.

DC: Could you see the flood?

OB: Yes.

DC: What was your reaction when you first saw the water?

OB: My reaction wasn't too much at first. The first thing I noticed was garbage cans, and then things got better. Finally, a bus came floating down the street. A garage finally came loose and floated onto the football field.

DC: Could you see your home from where you were?

OB: No, we couldn't see it. Trees covered it pretty well.

DC: Could you imagine what was happening to it?

OB: I didn't know just how it would go. We're reasonably close to the canal, between divert the water or it would kind of trap it. I didn't think it would flow quite so fast, because the canal was very high there.

DC: How long was it before you got down to see what your house looked like?

OB: It was the next day, Sunday that we came down about 10:30.

DC: What was your first impression when you saw your house?

OB: It was really a mess. It looked like it was going to take a long time to clean it up.

DC: Was it on the foundation?

OB: Yes, it didn't move at all. There were several other houses that were wrecked but ours stood there pretty well. It was fairly high, actually, that was one reason why I didn't think it would get in the top floor at all. I thought it would just get in the bottom.

DC: Did it get up on the top floor?

OB: Yes, it got about fourteen inches in the main floor.

DC: What was the reaction of your family?

OB: All I had with me was the boys, because we'd gone up to Driggs and my wife stayed there. The boys and I came back down to see what it had done.

DC: How did you get out and in again?

OB: We had a hard time getting out. We tried to go up over the dry farms and around, and then I couldn't find the road that would get us out. I ended up back down here. We just followed the water around as close as we could get and went through some fields. Somebody had already gone through them. It was dark then and we had to have lights on. We got cut in the field roads that led into Teton. My son, his wife, and their baby were in his car. My wife and two boys were with me in my car. We went together up to Teton Basin and stayed with my sister who lives west of Driggs, about five or six miles.

DC: How did you get back in?

OB: We just came back in. There wasn't anybody to check the travel in from that direction.

DC: They didn't have the check stand?

OB: Not up there they didn't. That wasn't until later.

DC: Did you have any unusual experiences in connection with the flood that you know of?

OB: Not too much. The only thing that was kind of unusual, my son had left his tithing on his dresser down in the basement. He had a twenty dollar bill, a one dollar bill and seventy cents change just lying on top of his dresser. Everything was tipped over and stirred around and we found the twenty dollar bill, the one dollar bill and ten cents of the change.

DC: Did you family stay up in Driggs until they were able to move back into their home?

OB: No, we stayed up there and went back and forth for three days and three nights. Dean Ricks had an apartment upstairs that he let my son move back into. Two of the boys and I came and stayed with them for a couple more nights and by then, we got the top of the house cleaned out a little bit. We put springs on the floor and slept in the house from then on.

DC: How about the area surrounding your house? What did that look like?

OB: It was a mess. There was mud all over the lawn and garden. Where we lived the water was slowed down because of the railroad grade on the east and the canal on the east. I think it just dropped a lot of silt there. There was a great big Hereford bull dead in the back yard. The garden had been weeded just the day before the flood and it was just covered with mud. Nothing came up after that except the raspberries. We did get a few of them.

DC: Were you able to get all that silt cleaned off?

OB: No.

DC: Has anything grown there this year?

OB: Yes, I just plowed the mud under. I thin when we get it mixed with the other soil it might be good. I don't think it hurt anything except the grass.

DC: How about the logs from the sawmill?

OB: We are in a sheltered area and we missed the logs, but across the street from us and around the corner there were logs all over everything. Ours was well protected. There was an apartment house through the block in the direction it had come from and two or three other houses that pretty well screened them off.

DC: How soon after the flood were you able to move your family back into your home?

OB: My youngest child was fourteen, so we got right back in. It wasn't cleaned completely. We cleaned out the top floor, but there still was water and mud in the basement. We were just camping out. I had a Coleman stove in the garage, I got it out, rinsed it off, and used it to heat water.

DC: You didn't have any utilities did you?

OB: No, there wasn't any gas or electricity. However, the water was on. We had filled the tub with water before we left so we had water right to start with. We began cleaning before they let us use the water, but after that it was no problem. We didn't have any hot water though; except if we heated it on the gas stove.

DC: As you looked over your home, did you have a feeling of discouragement?

OB: More confusion. I knew that, unless I cleaned out the garage, I wouldn't have any place to put anything that was in the house. It seemed like I'd go out there and start shoveling and then leave and go back in and start doing a few things in the house and I'd get myself back into the garage and start cleaning out again. I wanted to do it myself because all my tools were loose in the mud and I wanted to find them. When we finally got the garage cleaned out, we moved the stuff out of the house into there.

DC: Did anyone help you do that?

OB: Right at first no one did, but I had three boys and so it wasn't hard for us. Later, we had volunteers help us for three days. They worked mainly in the basement and some women helped to wash bottles. We were going to throw them away, but they washed them so we decided to keep them. Several of my relatives from Utah and Pocatello came and helped us also.

DC: What kind of contribution did they make?

OB: It really helped. That's the hardest part of it for me to talk about. Every time I think about it, I get choked up. I was in the bishopric and I helped quite a bit on assigning the volunteers around to different people's places. There were so many of them that came and their willingness to do that dirty work was really something. They just worked and worked. I took a group of them over to our neighbor's house. She wasn't there. She was quite elderly and had slipped and hurt her back the first day and was in the hospital. It was a good thing because it kept her from really getting into problems with her health. They spent the whole day in her basement; just packing mud out with buckets. They had to pass the buckets along. It was a group from Brigham City. They came from everywhere to help in anyway they were needed.

DC: AS a member of the bishopric, were there any unusual circumstances that you had to deal with?

OB: Our whole ward was hit pretty hard. There was only one house that didn't get much. We were right there on the north of Highway 88 extending to the street just across from the sawmill. All those logs just came through the whole area. I think the logs did more damage than any other one thing. The first place they hit was the Twin Pines Apartments. A lot of people were living on the second and third story and their places were all right, but all the bottom ones were completely gone. There were many elderly people in there. One lady that lived in the basement had an electric organ and she'd had someone move it out to the north of the building. She called and wanted me to get it for her. I went over there and it looked like a bulldozer had run over it. It was about half smashed. She was concerned about it and thought she could put it back together. I think that was one of the biggest problems; trying to save things that could never be repaired. We wasted our time trying to keep them. I took our rug out and it was the hardest job I ever had trying to get that out of the front door. It was one of those long shags. One of my boys spent three days on that and then several of us helped in between times. We built a kind of platform with some lumber and some cinderblock out on the front yard. There just wasn't any place to put anything. We tried and tried to get the rug clean and finally we had to throw it away. We didn't realize the government was going to help out, but we were trying to save it and it was a waste of time.

DC: How do you feel when you found out that you were going to be reimbursed?

OB: We really felt grateful about it. It was kind of slow coming. We knew they were talking about it and finally it came through.

DC: Did you anticipate that there would be some recovery?

OB: I thought probably there would be because it was caused by the failure of a federal project, but I didn't know.

DC: Were you going to go ahead as if there wasn't?

OB: Right. We were trying to save everything we thought we could save. In fact, that couch and some other things I put in the garage we were going to save, but I didn't take the cushions off when I did, they mildewed. The water got up into the cushions and I didn't realize it was quite that deep. It seemed like it went up through them. The mattresses were piled about five high in the front room and it went up through the ones that were above the water.

DC: What's the most cherished item that you lost during the flood?

OB: I suppose it was pictures and some of our genealogy books. We've still got the genealogy books, but they're not useable. I think maybe, as we get time, we can get the information from them. The pictures are the hardest to replace because there is no way to replace them.

DC: As the government agencies began operation in the area, when interaction did you have with them?

OB: We had to go over to the college and register. It was hard to stand in line when I felt like I needed to be home working. I went up there about four or five times. I'd stand in line for a while and then I'd go home and get to work. We didn't get in there until after the lines were pretty well down.

DC: Which agencies did you deal with?

OB: We went over to the Ricks College field house. There was a maze of different agencies there. At the time, I couldn't see much point in most of it. I didn't want to visit the Red Cross because I didn't need their help while other might. We had to register with the SBA and the Bureau of Reclamation. I didn't want to stay in line very long so I thought I'd go back when I had time and when the lines would be shorter.

DC: Did you file a claim with the Bureau of Reclamation?

OB: Yes, we filed our claim before a lot of people did. In fact, we filed with the SBA because we were getting to the point where we had to start spending a little money to get things fixed up. We had our claim in right soon after and we used about five thousand dollars from the SBA.

DC: Did you have any problems in having your claim processed?

OB: No, not really. It went through fairly fast. We were one of the earlier ones getting their claim in and were about the last ones to file with the SBA. The SBA money did come through about a week before the claim.

DC: Did you feel like the amount of money that you received compensated you for the loss?

OB: Yes, I feel that it did. I think on the remodeling they had it figured pretty close. We did most of the work ourselves. We made a few changes while we were working on the house. By doing the work, it came out about even. We still have some things to do yet. We haven't replaced the garage door, and we haven't fixed the back yard yet. We've done the garden and most of the front yard, but I've still got more to do on that.

DC: But your house itself; is it essentially finished?

OB: There's more to do on it, but we have it quite livable. We have carpets in it. I've got to do a little more work on the paneling and the trim and I haven't put the windows in the basement yet. The windows, we've got the old windows, didn't break in our home during the flood. One window pane was completely missing but when we found it the glass wasn't broken. I don't know why.

DC: Did you have any dealings with any of the local law enforcement agencies?

OB: A little. The day of the flood, when we got to go a little higher on the hill to see how we could get out, I drove the car through and they wouldn't let me come back. I had to walk down and get my son's car and the rest of the family who were down here on campus.

DC: Did you have a family elsewhere that tried to contact you?

OB: Yes, my wife had a sister in Challis that tried to get a hold of us. We never did get that work. I had a sister in Salt Lake that tried and we never did make contact until about four days later; partly because we were gone up to Driggs. We weren't here at the Manwaring Center, or we probably could have found out earlier about it. I did call some of them from up at Driggs, though, when we went up there.

DC: There are those who look upon the breaking of the dam as a kind of divine punishment for the sinful living. Do you agree with that?

OB: No, I don't feel it had anything to do with that at all. I think it helped us spiritually. I think it was a man-made mistake. I don't feel like it was any sort of punishment at all.

DC: Have you felt any animosity toward the engineers or those that were building the dam?

OB: No, I don't. I'm sure they did what they thought was right. I don't have any feeling against those who built the dam.

DC: Do you think that the dam should be rebuilt someday?

OB: Yes, I do. They've put in quite a network of pipelines up in the dry farms for irrigation purposes and all that would be wasted. I think we'll still have the same problem with spring runoff, at least for the people who live along the Teton, that we used to have. It hasn't bothered us here in town too much. I think we need it for what little power they can get from it and for the irrigation purposes.

DC: As you look back over this experience, has there been any changes in your life?

OB: I think that some of my values have changed. Some of the little things that were lost aren't really that important. Even the pictures weren't that important because we didn't look at them everyday. I don't worry much about those little things, the material things. I think the Lord helped us out, but the Lord wasn't responsible. It was one of man's failures in judgment. I believe the construction of the dam was at fault because it seems like it came right through the dam. I don't think it went around it; it came right through the dam. It must have been faulty construction or materials. I think everything was done in good faith and that no one was really to blame for it.

DC: As you were trying to maintain the functions of a ward, did they have any special problems?

OB: There were a lot of people who needed a little more attention than they got. I think that was the hardest thing. I think it was really hard on the older people. We have a neighbor right by us, quite an elderly lady. She just wasn't happy. She was in a trailer and the trailer was a lot nicer than her home, at least during the time until her home was repaired, but the house really should have been torn down. It was an older home and the rock foundation was washed out from underneath the house. She just wanted to get back in her house. She said, "It will last as long as I will, and that's all I care about."

DC: What was her name?

OB: Nancy Casper. She'd be a good one to talk to if you happen to have an opportunity.

DC: Where did you hold your church meetings?

OB: We were up here in the Manwaring Center's Little Theatre. We met there all summer. We got back into our chapel when school started.

DC: Was your home teaching program activated?

OB: Not really. We were quite disorganized until after we started meeting on a regular basis and then things got straightened out. We finally found out where everyone was. We had one casualty in the ward, but it wasn't the flood itself that caused it. The fellow was going to stay in his trailer to make sure nobody would take anything and he accidentally shot himself and bled to death before anyone got there. People heard the shots, but didn't think anything about it. It was just a shot in the leg. Some people thought it was suicide, but I believe it was completely accidental.

DC: What was his name?

OB: Stanley Peterson. He wasn't very active, but he did come out some- he's a widower. He had one daughter living with him and a son who had lived with him. It was unfortunate, but it was just one of those things that happen. His daughter was living with somebody else from the ward; somewhere in the Ricks College housing. It was awfully hard to find out where people were.

DC: Do you remember the first fast and testimony meeting that you held?

OB: Yes.

DC: Was there any bitterness expressed?

OB: No, none at all. We had sister Lyman, one of the older women in our ward, but she doesn't act like it. She acts like one of the youngest. She said, "A little thing like a flood

can't keep me down." She went right back into her home the first night and stayed. She had her boots by her bed and the bed, itself, wasn't wet. Her house is quite high, but it was where a lot of the logs came. There was a great big tank about as high as the eaves of her house between her place and Brother Pieper's. It had several gallons of unleaded gasoline. I don't know how it got in there. It looked impossible that it could have floated there.

DC: What is her first name?

OB: Angie Lyman.

DC: And Pieper?

OB: Albert Pieper. They live right closed to each other. They had a lot of logs. One of the biggest logs I saw was right by Albert Pieper's house. It apparently had floated against it and stopped and then it kind of piled up other logs on top of it. It held other logs back from doing too much damage to his house except the windows.

DC: As you look back over this experience, is there anything else that stands out in your memory?

OB: No, it's something that we wouldn't want to do again. I think it's a worthwhile experience to have had. It's kind of like some of the other things that we have that aren't always pleasant, but we really learn a lot from the experiences. It was quite a long drag. I remember how tired we'd get carrying mud, about sixteen hours a day. When those volunteer workers came in, kids around fourteen or fifteen would run up those stairs with a great big garbage can full of mud. By that time, I had a hard time carrying up one or two buckets full. It got kind of heavy. I think the hardest thing we had was getting the basement pumped out so we could start doing something. It was so full of everything. We tried pumping the basement out with a pump my brother brought, but it wouldn't work. Finally, brother Atkinson, from out in Lyman, came with one of those manure pumps. We got most of the water out and then we were able to get the other things out of it. We got another manure pump to come back, after we got the debris out of it, and pumped it out again.

We had another humorous thing happen. My boy had a sign in his room, "This room unfit for human habitation." We had shelves on the wall in his room and somehow that sign, it was in a frame, got stuck on one of the shelf brackets. It was still hanging up there after the flood. Right around the corner from us there was a granary that had floated in. It was a big granary made out of cement and it kind of slid along the power line and cut into it. Somebody put a sign on it, "Every time I find where it is, somebody moves it."

DC: Is there anything else?

OB: No, I believe that's all.

DC: Thank you Mr. Bates.