

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of informant Larry M. Lewis
Address 2404 Waverly, Rapid City, South Dakota
Date of Interview June 28, 1972
Name of Researcher O. A. Rothlisberger
Others Present Offices of Lewis and Kirkeby Real Estate, 728 Blvd, Rapid City.
Location of Interview _____
Added Notes _____

Subject Headings under which you feel this interview should be filed:

Rapid City flood victim. Good tape. Mr. Lewis' comments concerning allegedly inadequate warning are quite interesting.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 33 Sex Male County Pennington

Socio-economic status Upper middle

Occupation Real estate

Education _____

Religion _____

Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota _____

Where? _____

From where? _____

Number of Moves in South Dakota _____ Reasons for move: _____

A. My name is Larry Lewis, my family and I lived at 2404 Waverly Drive, and a family of three children and, of course, my wife. We had moved to that area, because we did want to be near the creek and it was a beautiful area, and we had not given any real serious consideration as to the problem of flooding there, because it was a beautiful area, and then, never particularly had those problems in recent years. On the evening of June 9, which was the date of the flood, we had spent a quiet early evening at home, having dinner and then taking a drive around the south west part of town in the rain. We rather enjoy riding in the rain. When we came. . .drove back home, which should have been probably between 8 and 9 o'clock that night, we had known, there had been considerable amount of rain. And we did turn on the radio and T. V., to get any reports that there might be. There was water running in our street in front, at the time, which was not particularly unusual for Rapid City, as Rapid City does not have storm sewer systems, so a lot of your drainage, is carried by the street drainage. As the evening progresses, there became more water in the street, and in our general area. The flood reports over the radio, I considered to be fairly normal, stating that there was flooding on Rapid, in the Rapid Creek area. Please do not drive on the west side of town. And later on, probably in the 9:30 vicinity, they asked for boats of over 35 horsepower motors, to go up to Canyon Lake area, to help out. One of the things that bothers me is we'd received word via way of the newspapers, several days later, that the city officials and other officials were aware that water was going over Canyon Lake Dam, about 45 minutes before it actually broke. And yet, they did not notify the people of the seriousness of this situation, in fact, they must have underestimated the seriousness of

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places, but on the back water, it was seven feet deep. And on the outside the water appeared to be up over, and was up over the first floor, so I would guess it was between eight and ten feet deep at time, and it was rushing extremely hard. I could reach out of the second story window and touch the water. And I would say at this point, the time was somewhere shortly after 11 o'clock. And we did have flashlights, rather strong flashlight up there and candles, and we watched from our second story window a number of homes come down the rushing waters, and from upstream. The first big one we say that was still relatively intact, just walked right over and crushed the trees, that had been several feet, several hundred feet, excuse me, from our back door. And one of the main streams was 200 feet behind out back yard. A couple of blocks up stream from us, the Rapid Creek normally makes an "S" curve, but this night it didn't make the "S" curve, it kept straight on, going straight. And soon, the homes on the half a block behind us were swept away. One of them was just picked up and floated intact downstream. Two others seemed to disintegrate, right at the time, and were just completely smashed. And when we saw the last one go, and were quite sure that ours was soon on the list to go because it seemed to be shuddering and shimming, and we could hear the 2 x 4's cracking and snapping on the lower level. At that point, we were considering actually going in the water, from the back around the front side of the house where the current was not as strong, and trying to make a swim for some higher trees, 'cause we were concerned if our home just disintegrated like some of the other, we would be trapped under the rough, and never make it out. We did have life jackets on. However, we decided that we would ride out the house as long as possible. And when our house did start to go, we

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Demographic Information on Informant

Age 33 Sex Male County Pennington

and economic status Upper middle

education Real estate

Education

Religion

Date of arrival of family in South Dakota

where?

from where?

Number of moves in South Dakota

Reasons for moves:

A. My name is Larry Lewis, my family and I lived at 2404 Waverly Drive, and a family of three children and, of course, my wife. We had moved to that area, because we did want to be near the creek and it was a beautiful area, and we had not given any real serious consideration as to the problem of flooding there, because it was a beautiful area, and then, never particularly had those problems in recent years. On the evening of June 9, which was the date of the flood, we had spent a quiet early evening at home, having dinner and then taking a drive around the south west part of town in the rain. We rather enjoy riding in the rain. When we came. . .drove back home, which should have been probably between 8 and 9 o'clock that night, we had known, there had been considerable amount of rain. And we did turn on the radio and T. V., to get any reports that there might be. There was water running in our street in front, at the time, which was not particularly unusual for Rapid City, as Rapid City does not have storm sewer systems, so a lot of your drainage, is carried by the street drainage. As the evening progresses, there became more water in the street, and in our general area. The flood reports over the radio, I considered to be fairly normal, stating that there was flooding on Rapid, in the Rapid Creek area. Please do not drive on the west side of town. And later on, probably in the 9:30 vicinity, they asked for boats of over 35 horsepower motors, to go up to Canyon Lake area, to help out. One of the things that bothers me is we'd received word via way of the newspapers, several days later, that the city officials and other officials were aware that water was going over Canyon Lake Dam, about 45 minutes before it actually broke. And yet, they did not notify the people of the seriousness of this situation, in fact, they must have underestimated the seriousness of

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from the main floor, and it was soon thereafter, that the water on

LL the inside of the house was probably 7 feet deep, up ~~the~~ to the ceiling in places, but on the back water, it was 7 feet deep, and on the outside the water appeared to be up over, and was up over the first floor, so I would guess it was between 8 and 10 feet deep at times, and it was rushing extremely hard. I could reach out of the second story window and touch the water. And I would say at this point, the time was somewhere shortly after 11:00 o'clock. And we did have flashlights, rather strong flashlight up there and candles, and we watched from our second story window a number of homes come down the rushing waters, and from upstream. The first big one we saw that was still relatively intact, just walked right over and crushed the trees, that had been several feet, several hundred feet, excuse me, from our back door. And one of the main streams was 200 feet behind our back yard. A couple of blocks up stream from us, the Rapid Creek normally makes an "S" curve, but this night it didn't make the "S" curve, it kept straight on, going straight. And soon, the homes on the half a block behind us were swept away. One of them was just picked up and floated intact downstream. Two others seemed to disintegrate,, right at the time, and were just completely smashed. And when we saw the last one go, and were quite sure that ours was soon on the list to go because it seemed to be shuddering and shimminng, and we could hear the 2x4's cracking and snapping on the lower level. At that point, we were considering actually going in the water, from the back around the front side of the house where the current was not as strong, and trying to make a swim for some higher trees, 'cause we were con - coerned that if our home just disintegrated like some of the others, we would be trapped under the rough, and never make it out

LL We did have life jackets on~~ly~~. However, we decided that we would ride out the house as long as possible. And when our house did start to go, we would jump from the windows that we had broekn out and make a chance at it at that time. We kept a watch out fhe front and back, for any large debris, or particularly houses, that might be crashing into ours because that's what seemed to move things in a hurry, and seemed to demolish other homes. We saw one coming towards our neighbor's house which was upstream, and the house did slice it right in half, crushing one half of it, and go by the back of our house, approximately 50 feet from ours and slice off our other neighbor's garage without even slowing up. The neighbor's house upstream that had just been cut in hafl, the balance of it started moving towards us, and finally took off and we at that point, that it would probably hit us, and take us with it. So we got pæpared to jump as it was coming towards us, but it jammed into two large, farily large trees on that side of our hosue, and jammed in there, and as it was a big house, that jammed in there, it started catching debris, such as two fairly large trees that caught on it, and and this total combination dirverted the water, one of the main forces of water around us, rather than towards and over us. And I feel this was the primary reason why our house did remain, and didn't did not get washed away. Had our house gone I'm sure that it would have taken our next door neighbors house with it, which is just downstream about 15 feet, and there were, I believe, about seven people in that home also, which was a two-story home,

And we kept a pretty close watch thereafter on the house that had jammed abainst the trees and saved us, and also on the water level. About 12:30, we fe~~ll~~ that we were relatively safe and the high dnager point was over, because we were kind of sure that the

LL house that had jammed in there was not going any farther and that our house would not go. However, we used the remaining tree as a measuring point and kept an eye on the water level. And between 12:30 and 1:30, the water level seemed to go down about a foot, or possibly slightly more. About 1:30, if our guesses were right, it rased a little bit, probably three to six inches, we thought, and, of course, this concerned us very much, that we might be getting additional waters coming down or perhaps Pactola or some other dam had given way. But that didn't last too long, and the water, slowly, and I say that, I mean it, slowly went down thereafter. We thought that once the big force went by that it would go down quite rapidly, but it took most of the night for the water to go down, and by daybreak, we could actually go out on the island of Hebris that had been build up around our house, and walk around. And daybreak was about 5:00 o'clock, however, there was still a heavy current both in Rapid Creek in front of us and the street in front of us, and this deviding stream that separated us in the back that had taken so many homes, was still running rapid current. And all that morning, they tried to get boats across, or people on lines across, but were unable to do so. Several rather large fellows with ropes to them tried to wade across to our rescue, but they were swept downstream, and had to be pulled in by their rope. Fianlly at 2:00 o'clock the next afternoon, they took us out by boat across Rapid Creek, the boat was attached to a cable spanning the Creek, and they were able to take us out that way. There were interest, many interesting stories of neighbors who had gotten trapped in similar situations as ours, jsut not being aware of the real

LL daanger we were in. They had all more or less taken the attitude or felt the same thing we did, that even if flood conditions existed, they were concerned about furniture and things in their house, and what might be considered routine flooding, just a foot or two of water in your living room. These people had they been notified of emergency evacuation, (Notices), would certainly have left as soon as they received that word that the lives were in danger, and we would have also. One of the neighbors, just across the street from us, had to go to their attic, the water was, covered the entire first floor, and he could feel the water against his body, and they were trapped in the attic, unable to break the roof of the house off, out, so they could get up on the roof. And, of course, they spent a rather terrifying night, in that predicament. Another neighbor across the way, spent the night in their house, in a back bedroom, where the water did not actually rush through, but had backed up, to the point it was up to her neck, and this was a older woman, probably about seventy years old in there, with a sixteen year old retarded grandchild, granddaughter, and this elderly woman had the forethought to put her daughter on the mattress and the mattress floated in there and she helped hold it up for most of the evening. Fortunately, they both lived. However, all of our neighbors were not that fortunate; we had five of, six of our immediate neighbors die as a result of ~~not~~ not being as lucky and fortunate as we were. We had other neighbors whose homes were swept away, and several of them were swept away, but did manage to live by grabbing trees downstream or something like that. And, of course, by the grace of God, we were saved. And we would urge that any communities in the future not, not under-

LL estimate the danger and the power of water, and don't hesitate to warn the people when it is evident that their lives can be in danger.

Thank you.

OR Mr, Lewis' property and house at 728, Rap, correction, Mr. Lewis' house and property at 2404 Waverly Drive, Rapid City was located within the southwest quarter of the northeast quarter of section 9, township 1 north, range east.