

## SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of Informant Donald V. Barnett, Mayor  
Address 24 Nevada Drive, Rapid City, South Dakota  
Date of Interview July 17, 1972  
Name of Researcher Earl Hausle  
Others Present none  
Location of Interview Mayor's Office, City Hall, Rapid City, South Dakota  
Added Notes Prior to the interview, the Mayor had already prepared for various reports a timetable of events.

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

Notification and preparation; Canyon Lake visits and evacuation; Requests for boats;

General evacuation order; Attempted rescue on Jackson Boulevard; Mt. View Rest Home call; Attempted rescue in trees by Sergeant Peterson of National Guard.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 29 Sex Male County Pennington  
Socio-economic status Upper middle class  
Occupation Mayor of Rapid City  
Education B.A. plus SDSU and grad work at U. of Nebraska  
Religion Protestant  
Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_  
Where? \_\_\_\_\_  
From Where? \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of Moves in South Dakota \_\_\_\_\_ Reasons for moves: \_\_\_\_\_

EH Rapid City South Dakota, July 17, 1972; Earl Hausle interviewing Rapid City Mayor Donald Barnett. Mr. Mayor, can you give us the sequence of events that occurred on June 9th, prior to and including the flood?

DB Yes. On the afternoon of June 9th, I don't very often do it, but I took the afternoon off at about four o'clock, which means I left the office here at about a quarter to four,

c and I was gonna play golf with a friend of mine. We played golf that evening, in fact, I even got a little bit wet because of some light showers. But the rains were not heavy, and the only thing we noticed was a big cloud hanging over the Black Hills. Now, that's quite common on a June evening especially in early June, this time of the year, so nobody got very concerned about that. At about 7 o'clock I took my wife and two little daughters to the YMCA where we swam for about 45 minutes. At about a quarter to 8 or 8 o'clock, I came out the door of the YMCA and I was immediately informed by the clerk there that they were going to anticipate a lot of water in Rapid Creek due to some heavy rains. At that time I said goodbye to my wife and my little daughters, and I hopped in my car that has the police radio in it, and I drove as fast as I could to city hall where already we were beginning to assemble the off duty policemen and the public works employees to see what could be done to take care of the expected high water along Rapid Creek. We also were concerned at that time that a lot of heavy rain, and it was springing in Rapid City at this time, we were concerned that a lot of heavy rain may produce ~~some~~ some damage up in the Meade Street area of southeast Rapid City. It was about 8:15 then that I met the director of public works, Mr. Swanson, at City Hall, and we left from there and went directly to Canyon Lake Park. Where when we did leave city hall, I noted at that time that the police department were responding in a routine way, and they were having all the off duty officers come back to work, and they were calling in the reserves, anticipating that there would have to be some additional effort made by our police department during that evening. When we arrived at Canyon Lake Park, we went immediately to the caretakers cabin and then we also went up on the dam to take a look at the situation. By that time we had 2 or 3 crew members there, and we made an effort at that time to raise the gates or in other words, to let some water out of



DB Canyon Lake Dam so that we could establish for ourselves some storage space in the lake in case we had a lot of inflow from above Canyon Lake Park. At 8:30 I went back to city hall to try to determine what was going on there. All the men were being assembled at that time. We at that time put a call out for all of the public works employees to return to work to the street department or to the park department office, so that we could attempt to have some more manpower in case they were needed. At this time, though, as far as ~~the~~ the warnings that we had been given, we'd only been told over the radio and from the weather bureau that we could anticipate heavy rains. We had no indication whatsoever the rains would be five, seven, eight, ten, fourteen inches in some areas. ~~THE~~It was at that time that Mr. Swanson and I parted company, he took his automobile and I took mine, and I kept one of the portable public works radios with me so that I could be in contact with Mr. Swanson. At ~~eight~~ 8:45 we were back in the western end of Rapid City and around 9 o'clock, and again we were letting water out of the dam there, and crews were being assembled. ~~And~~ <sup>It was</sup> shortly after this time that Mr., Mr., I can't think of his name, the fellow at the park and his family were told to leave the, the area, they went to the home of Mr. Bernie Linder, where his wife and children I understand, spent the next few days. At about 9:15 I went back downtown to the police department and picked up the chief of police and we began to make some visual inspections of the city to try to ascertain what the problem would be. By this time there was a heavy deluge of water and rain falling in Rapid City, and this was my third trip out to the western end of Rapid City. We went to the Canyon Lake Club there and parked our automobile there where we met Mr. Swanson, at that time the three of us went around to the upper end of Canyon Lake Park, of Canyon Lake Dam where the bridge was. By that time the fire department were there, and several other people were there in rescue outfits, along with the utility trucks from Black Hills Power and Light and Montana-Dakota utilities. I remember briefly talking to Mr. George Miller, the local manager of ~~Dakota~~ ~~Montana~~ Montana Dakota Utilities at that time, and we, and we believed that the ~~rain~~ rain would stop in a very short period of time, and we would escape major flooding. At 9:45, however, after Mr. Swanson had gone back to the Canyon Lake Park and had gone back to the face of Canyon Lake Dam and noticed that the spillway was clogged with debris

DB and clogged with the floating ~~boats from~~ boats from the concession over by the Canyon Lake Club which by that time had floated all the way around the spillway then were blocking the spillway, it was at that time that Mr. Swanson ordered the evacuation of Canyon Lake Park. It was a very, this was a very wise decision on the part of Mr. Swanson, he recognized the potential danger of some extensive damage to the dam, and so consequently he got all the city employees, all the picnickers, and I might add some, some young couples that were down in Canyon Lake Park, which they sometimes do before 10 o'clock at night. He was able then to get those people out of the park, and we met at the Canyon Lake Club then, in the parking lot, at which time I ordered the evacuation of the Canyon Lake Club, to try to get those people into high ground, to a safer area. It was at that time that I was in constant contact with our police department, doing the best I could to keep informed what the police department were doing as far as evacuation was going on. At that time we had a couple of major problems. First of all, I was trying to get a boat, because we knew of some families that were stranded behind Canyon Lake in the area of the Canyon Lake Guest Ranch. Also, we had been told that a family was stranded in on the Box Elder Creek area on the dog tracks. So consequently, I went on the radio at 9:45 over at KOTA, and I asked anyone who had a boat of at least 14 feet long and at least 35 horsepower, to come directly to Canyon Lake to the Canyon Lake Club where I would personally dispatch that boat to save a couple of families which had been stranded, and also, I asked anyone over the radio that had an automobile to go directly to the dog track where the highway patrol would meet that boat and consequently would use it to save that one stranded family out near the dog track. Well, that took about fifteen minutes to get that message through. It got to be around 10 o'clock when it was obvious we were in the middle of what could be called a, a major calamity, and we were involved in a lot of danger, and so at that time I, I tried to keep in constant contact with the police department to find out what could be the problem. It was, at around a little after 10 o'clock that I received an emergency message over my two-way radio which told me to make a long distance phone call upstream above Rapid City. I did that. I drove out of the parking lot at the Canyon Lake Club, well, I never had gone in the building except to use the phone once, and I drove directly to the Canyon



DB Lake Liquor Store, I called the police department, they gave me a number to call, and then I dialed directly to this area above Rapid City. The gentleman I spoke with said he had just been in the neighborhood of highway 385 and highway 40, and Rapid Creek really isn't too close to that junction, so it's kind of difficult to , to know whether or not he was looking at Rapid Creek or at the whole valley of the drainage area there; he told me he had never seen anything like it, it was more water than he could even describe, and he thought the city of Rapid City should be abandoned, or especially those areas by the creek. Well, that was good enough warning for me, and I immediately called KOTA then at 10:15, and I issued the general evacuation order, to have all properties along Canyon Lake, along Canyon Lake and along Rapid Creek completely evacuated for a block or two each way. I asked people if they heard this message to immediately get away from Rapid Creek as fast as they could. It was at that time that I recognized the need for an additional meeting, and so I knew the public works director had gone back to City hall to summon some crews, so I got on the radio with him, and I announced, I told him that we would have a meeting of the police chief, the police chief and myself and Mr. Swanson, underneath the clock at Baken Park. We thought that would be an easy place to find Mr. Swanson, and where we could also have a meeting and try to coordinate some of the activities, because we recognized we were in the middle of a disaster. As I got back to my automobile, Chief Messer called me from his car and explained that he was on Jackson Boulevard at Third Avenue, and there was some families whose homes were blocked off on the other side of Jackson Boulevard, couldn't get to them. So it was about between 10:15 and 10:30 that Jackson Boulevard completely flooded because I just talked to Mr. Messer and I just had driven across Jackson Boulevard about ten minutes before then. So consequently, I went to the west side fire station looking for men , by this time all of the firemen were out in residential areas warning people as they'd been instructed to do. All right, at 10:35 then, I went to the west side fire station, I went through all the lockers and I was able to find 8 life jackets. As I went down the Soo San Drive Hill at the junction of Canyon Lake Drive and Sioux San Drive, I spotted a heavy duty vehicle that had four airmen from Ellsworth in it. I commandeered that vehicle and those

DB men, I told them who I was, I said they were under my control, they'd come with me, and they said, "Yes, sir." They followed me as fast as we could drive over about 2 or 3 feet of water down Evergreen Drive to around the corner there by Cottonwood, and we eventually got onto Third Avenue. We drove down Third Avenue as far as we could go, at that time we abandoned the vehicles, we took the eight life jackets, about 200 feet of heavy rope, and we waded in about 4 feet of water directly to the junction of Third Avenue and Jackson Boulevard. We had one loudspeaker hand microphone, and we also had at that time, like I say, these life jackets and man power and that ~~xx~~ rope. I found Messer, by this time all electricity had been out in Canyon Lake, when there would be lightning, you could look across the street and see those people huddled in their driveway on that pink house on the south side of Jackson Boulevard. We tried everything in the world to get across that, that street, we even tied the rope around one of the men, he was going to go upstream and try to float across, we felt that might endanger his life, some debris, the cars, the debris going by could have crushed him. Consequently, I got on the loud speaker and announced to those people as clearly as I could for them to get on their roof, for them to hang on to their chimney, that we had to evacuate the area. That was probably one of the most dramatic moments of the whole night, I didn't want to leave those people, I thought for sure they were going to be dead. When we left the area then, the firemen and Messer asked what to do, and I said "Let's go by these homes here and evacuate everyone." We went to all the homes that people willingly left, by this time some had gone already, there were no lights, it was complete mass confusion, Messer found a man that wouldn't move, he asked me what to do and I had that man arrested. It was, an interesting point is, on the morning following the terrible flood, at about 5:30 the next morning when the sun came up, the first body to be officially discovered was at the intersection of Third Avenue and Jackson Boulevard.

EH ~~When~~ What did you do after that?

DB After that we headed down Canyon Lake Drive to attempt to get to the National Guard camp and assist in the coordination of, of the effort that could be made by the National Guard and we received an emergency message over two way radio that said the west wall of Mountain View had collapsed, was there any unit in the area. I announced I was close



DB and I'd make an effort to get there. And then Sam Roach said that, "Ten-four," he said, "I'll get it." I thought Sam was below or downstream from Mountain View, but I found out later Sam was upstream from Mountain View. He simply got on Jackson Boulevard and floated his car, and somehow he had traction a few places; he was able to pick up two stragglers who were wading in the middle of the road, he threw them into his car, and the three of them went to, then we lost radio contact with Sam, his radio got wet. Sam, meanwhile, by about 11 o'clock or so, had gotten to the Mountain View nursing home, where he and these two other people personally evacuated 69 of the 72 residents there. When I realized I couldn't get across the street to get to behind Haggerty's there use that bridge, I tried to go around by the National Guard Camp to pick up some trucks and heavy machinery so that we could somehow get down there. However, we could not find a bridge. We simply could not find a bridge that we could get across the creek to get to Mountain View Nursing Home. We had no idea what the condition of it was until about 3 o'clock that morning when Sam's radio dried out and I heard Sam say, "This is Roach at Mountain View nursing home, I got that taken care of, you got anything else for me?" Just amazing, a quiet hero, remained calm and stable during the whole ~~xxx~~ operation. Then I took 6 National Guard trucks to Sergeant Peterson, the National Guard, and we headed down Deadwood Avenue onto West Chicago or West Omaha, where we tried to get across that bridge, we couldn't do so. However, we got there and one policeman had stopped because he had heard some screaming of ~~people~~ some people who had drifted off that road into the, into the trees and deep creek area there downstream from that bridge. There wasn't anybody to put in charge, so I saw a friend of mine, Sergeant Peterson, who has been in Air National Guard, I shined my flashlight in his face, and I said, "Peterson, you're taking over, get in them trees and save them people." He said, "Yes, sir." Pete went right to work, he got the ropes strung out, they got a boat that somebody brought by, they tied the heavy rope onto the boat, and they let it out, they, they tied the other end of the rope on a truck so they couldn't lose those people, and they fished that boat in there for several hours, and they were able to save one person. If they'd have been there a few moments earlier, they would have saved others, some were dead already, drowned in automobiles, and it was a pretty terrible situation. I then attempted to coordinate

DB things on the western end of the city. Messer was there and I was there, we knew where each other were most of the evening, and at that time also, I went to the Rushmore Marina on Sturgis road and commandeered another boat and three cases of life jackets, and I ~~passed~~ passed those out to people involved in rescue the rest of the night. That happened around midnight that I finally got that boat. After getting a good number of life jackets, I went around on interstate to the western part of town and took the LaCrosse Street exit on the interstate, went down in the area of Racine Street to the east of Roosevelt Park, cause I'd been told that one of the trailer parks down there was completely under water. I went down there to find a good number of volunteers hauling people out on their shoulders, coming out of four, five feet of water. Lots of heroes who I don't begin to know their names, they'd done a wonderful job of bringing people out of those trailer homes before they broke loose and going down the street and running into each other and it was, ~~it was~~ just the most horrifying experience you ever saw. It was at that time, I had my boat behind me that I'd commandeered, we helped get the boat launched, got it in the creek, and about five minutes later it tipped over and the operator of the boat sprained his leg quite severely, and I don't know what happened to him I haven't heard from him since, I know that he's alive, but I also know that he was physically injured and it will be the city's responsibility to pay for the damage to his boat as well as the three cases of life jackets that I'd commandeered from him by that time. By that time there was one lady suffering from exposure, we couldn't get her to a hospital, Messer put her in one of his, ~~in his~~ vehicle and took that lady directly to a private home of one of her relatives where she was given warm food and put to bed, and so consequently she was a survivor. Ron then picked me back up and we took off again and continued our efforts to , to look for the , try to coordinate the rescue activities. I then went into the area of Chicago Street, New York Street, trying to see what was being done there, and found that the fire department was on duty there, pulling people out of homes, pulling people off ~~buildings~~ debris and also trying to put a fire out that was down on East Boulevard, to my knowledge they never got the fire truck within two blocks of the building because of high water. But they did a good job there of keeping the (crowd) out of the water and trying to control this mass hysteria down



DB there, it made me very proud of the firemen. I then went back to Natioanl Guard camp and tried to check there, and by that time we had our first indication that some of our city employees had perished in the flood; I then worked with the National Guard and the police on the west end of town the rest of the night. I then talked the Natihal Guard into giving me a truck, no, first I took my car and went down to check the bridge at West Boulevard, it was the only operational bridge in the city at that time. There was no other way to get across Rapid ~~Creek~~ Creek, but on the eastern most bridge on the north bound lane, West Boulevard. I took my car across the bridge and then through about three feet of water across Omaha Street, up and across Omaha and then I went down and checked the fire departmnet, ~~there~~ weren't any people there, they were out doing their job as best they could; I went ot Civil Defense Headquarters, it was beginning to be operational, and I thought I might be able to get up West Main Street to get to Mountain View Nursing Home. However, I couldn't. And so consequently I went back down, I went across West Boulevard again, I crossed that one bridge, there was a big United States Mail Truck there that was making a threat to use the bridge. It was at that time I told Seargeant Kreble that no trucks would use that bridge except for emergency vehicles. And that all the semis parked there turn their engines off and spend of the rest of the night back on Interstate 90 because we didn't want to risk that bridge going out it was the only link we had between eastern and western part of the city. Okay, I went then back around the National Guard camp where they gave me a five ton vehicle, a five ton wrecker. The sun was starting to come up, we went back down to Swander's, then we went back to the Natinaal Guard Camp, around on the interstate, back across the bridge, went to Swander Baking Company where I left my car, and I rode in the five ton military vehicle up W. Main Street, through debris, walking and swimming survivors who were on the sidewalk by that time, only in a couple of feet of water and not in any danger. And I told them I was on the way to the hospital, and all these people suggested to go to the hospital right away. I went to the hospital at Bennet-Clarkson, that was the first, I was the first word to Bennet-Clarkson Hospital that morning. And were able to find out that they had no casualties there, patients per se, we did ~~not~~ know there were gonna be some people dead from the nursing home, I talked with Don Wessel for a moment

DB ~~xxxx~~ who'd been on duty at the water plant all night long; I got a list of the supplies needed by Bennet-Clarkson, took the five ton truck out and went back to my own vehicle, made the round trip back to the western part of town, went back to the Civil Defense Headquarters, by that time at about 5:30 , the radio came on and we began to restore some order to .

EH What was the situation at the Civil Defense headquarters when you arrived there?

DB When I got down to Civil Defense headquarters, I saw Glen Best, several other people running around, Swanson was there by that time also, he found a bridge could get him across the creek. And there was an effort in trying to inform the public through the radio what had happened; to begin to try to acquire some supplies and just to get organized, it did take a couple of days until Civil Defense headquarters did begin to function smoothly, but those people did the best they could under very trying circumstances. At that time, I was given the assurance by Mr. Stan Adelstein, who's one of the first people I saw at Civil Defense Headquarters, that St. John's Hospital was operational, they did have electricity restored, they did have a capability of that time of taking casualties, and it was that morning about 6 o'clock that Stan and I began to coordinate what way we could transport a serious patients from Bennet to St. John's Hospital. It was also at that time we made some estimations as to the amount of serum, medical supplies needed to get some inoculations started, we were very much concerned about typhoid, very much concerned about tetanus. We figured the entire population of the Black Hills would have to be provided with some protection, so we made some emergency orders right away of 160,000 units of bulk types of materials. Checked with military authorities, Civil Defense, Public Health and everything else to get those supplies into town. Things were very orderly down there at the , at the Civil Defense Headquarters to an extent! when, when you saw someone and you knew it had to be done, you could sit down, the two of you talk it over, have a definition of responsibility and get it done. There weren't people running around and panicing and screaming and crying and wailing; there was some organization to it. Also at that time, by that time when I made that trip to the Civil Defense Headquarters, I stopped by the firehall, passed out the rest of my life jackets to the



DB firemen who by this time were, were resting, those that could get back to the fire hall, and getting ready to send them back out again for rescue activity, and I took Chief Johnson with me to Civil Defense headquarters, we were there about ten minutes, and I ~~x~~ went back and turned him back over to the fire department because they had a fire call on the other side of Omaha Street where they couldn't get to.

EH How did you feel that the organized groups such as the National Guard, the City Police, Fire and other city employees responded during the emergency, before they <sup>had any</sup> ~~entered a~~ centralized direction?

DB I think they, I think that the organized outfits in the city responded very well. The National Guard people, as many as possible, got back to their duty stations, they were assigned various areas to extend the warning and involved in rescue. I think they did an outstanding job with not much warning and not much training for that type of thing, but they did a good job. I was very impressed all night long with the police department and the fire department. Nobody panicked. Nobody talked foolishness over the radio. Nobody screamed or murmured or wept or cried, they all worked like men all night long, I was very impressed with them. Another group I was very impressed with ~~were~~ the REACT people involved with the warning system. We lost four REACT people that night doing their very best to get the warning out to individuals, and I think they did a good job. We had to operate, very frankly, from the seat of our pants. Because the police department about 2 in the morning got wet, had to move to Signal Heights. By that I don't mean moved, the building, moved a police car and a motorcycle to Signal Heights and set the radio on that and used that as the police station for central dispatching. No telephone communication, it was just the very best they could do to utilize the personnel that they had available.

EH What are your comments regarding the response of people to the disaster?

DB I was very impressed with the quality ~~of~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ and the number of volunteers. Whenever I went on the radio and announced that we needed 500 volunteers to clear or search an area, within an hour I had a thousand volunteers. People responded very well. In fact, it was hard to provide enough good supervision to get ~~the~~ the maximum performance out of the hundreds of thousands of volunteers. People were very strong all the way through,

DB if we had some looting, it was very little. I think people recognized we were in the middle of a kind sized disaster and they did their very best to help us out. I was very, very impressed with our people. They showed good discipline, a cool judgment, and their calmness, I'm sure, saved several hundred lives.

EH What, would you care to comment on the response of the federal government and state government?

DB I was tremendously impressed with the available services provided first of all by the state government that gave us their full muscle right away, and also by the federal agencies who arrived on the scene on the morning of the third day, the Small Business Administration people were here on Sunday, and dozens of hundreds of other federal ~~officials~~ officials were in town by Monday to begin to provide the services of federal agencies, they did an outstanding job. I have no complaints. And to this day, six weeks following the flood, I have no complaints about the conduct of the federal government or the ~~agencies~~ agencies of it. They've done a wonderful job.

EH Now, looking back on the flood from this vantage point, what kind of progress do you think we've made so far in the aftermath of it?

DB In the aftermath of the flood, we've been able to haul away hundreds, and I mean hundreds of thousands of tons of debris; we've done our very best to clean up these neighborhoods, to tear down the buildings that have been completely inundated, sort of clear the area where right now it looks like an open space area, and area where there once were fields, but now there's caved in basements that have been filled up with dirt, we are starting to make a lot of progress throughout as far as that goes. I imagine we've hauled about 80% of our debris now out of the flood area, we may even have it a little higher than that. I was very impressed with the Corps of Engineers, the state government and our local city government here. We entered in the contracts of these large firms to haul that debris, they've done a real good job. The Red Cross, Salvation Army has been on hand ever since the second day, doing a wonderful job providing volunteer workers with meals, providing devastated families with money for clothing, for new housing, trying to get them started again. I've been very, very pleased so far.



*will you say*  
~~DEEH~~ You said a little bit about the Rapid City Disaster Foundation.

DBQ The afternoon of the flood, Tom Lan of the Chamber of Commerce stopped me, he says, "Don, we've gotto do something to help these people." I said, "Let's organize a fund or something." He says, "Good idea." I says "Tom, put it together and I'll sign my name on it. The next ~~three~~ three days they did that , we formed the Rapid City area Disaster foundation, within a week we appointed fifteen people to serve on the board of directors of the foundation, they've been doing an outstanding job. We've raised nearly a million dollars in six weeksof activity and fund raising, all of that money, 100% of it will be used as cash grants to the affected families by the flood. I've been to Nebraska twice, North Dakota once, several trips around South Dakota, this weekend I'll be going to Minnesota, where I'll go to two of the biggest cities there on fund-raising efforts that are being conducted by local people in those towns, help us raise the money to help these families. (Pause) If I could measure the success of our recoveryefforts thus far, I would say that the success of our recovery is based up on mutual respect which the various government officials have had for themselves and for each other. It was during these first hectic few days I never made any big decision without informing the county commissioner . Usually, the county commissioners also kept me informed about any major change in ~~policy~~ policy. We quickly established a coordinating committee the schools, the city and the county, the *board* body that was in session at all times to meet any little new change that might have happened. The state government was there also to help us with this coordination. We knew where they were, they knew where we were. On the third day, the federal government plugged themselves right into this, and we had a coordinated governmmetal effort here regarding the recovery. Not one of these governments could have done it alone, and it was so important for us to *know* know that we had tremendous support from all of them. And that's why it was successful. And that's why it will be successful the next few days.

(END OF INTERVIEW)