

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Name of informant Dr. Keith Johnson

Address 2436 Canyon Lake Drive, Rapid City, South Dakota

Date of Interview June 29, 1972

Name of Researcher O. A. Rothlisberger

Others Present _____

Location of Interview 1112 Jackson Boulevard, Rapid City.

Added Notes Dr. Johnson has several tapes about 1 1/2 hours, news reports, interview with mayor, other public officials; also, number of color slides.

Subject Headings under which you feel this interview should be filed:
Boat Rescue operations - Rapid City flood; Bennet-Clarkson Hospital; Baken Park area.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 41 Sex Male County Pennington

Socio-economic status Middle

Occupation Veterinarian

Education _____

Religion _____

Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota _____

Where? _____

From where? _____

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

Q. This morning I'm talking to Dr. Keith Johnson of Rapid City, South Dakota. Dr. Johnson, your address, home address. . . ?

A. 2436 Canyon Lake Drive.

Q. 2436 Canyon Lake Drive. Did you have any flood damage there, at your. . .at your home?

A. No. About the same _____ as the office is here.

Q. I see. Now you were involved in rescue operations with a boat the night of the flood and the following day, is that correct?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay, if you want to tell us what your role was and your experiences. . . .

A. Well, the circumstances leading up to me being in the area, I'm a member of a singing group. We sang out at the air base Friday night. We got done about, well, 10 o'clock in the evening, _____ mentioned that there were heavy water _____ town. And this was the Officer's Club, I left there and not a drop of water out there. Got to town about 10:30 and I, a group was planning a trip to Longmont, Colorado on Saturday and I didn't have a vehicle. The International Travel-all had a low tire, and there was a Standard Station in Baken Park. So as I came in town then about 10:30 the water was quite high and I was driving a small car. So I stopped at the station and the tire was ready, so I thought it'd be wiser to drive the car (with a little more clearance) home. So I drove it. . .I drove it then to my residence which was just about two blocks down from the Baken Park shopping center, got home in fine shape. And thought that this other vehicle I did leave was a new one, and I didn't feel right leaving it at the station. So I got on some old clothes and walked back, then, through the rain, this must have been a quarter to

eleven, and 'course as I came down Canyon Lake Drive I crossed Rapid Creek. It was running very full, but was still contained within its banks. I then drove, walked over to the Standard Station and drove the car over to my office here on 1112 Jackson Boulevard. And then started to walk back home again, and, which was a matter of about two or three blocks. I got just in front of Bennet-Clarkson hospital and started to walk in ankle deep water, some debris came along and hit me on the foot and I thought, "Well, this is not the place to be." So I got up on the front yard of Bennet-Clarkson Hospital, about that time a high line wire broke and quite a little sparks flew, and here again I thought, "This is no place to be." So I stood on the front steps of Bennet-Clarkson Hospital with, oh, six, half-a-dozen other people. And the water just came up at a tremendous rate. See, this must have been in the neighborhood of 11 o'clock or after.

- Q. Now, at this time, other than your observations, you were not aware of any serious flooding upstream. Had you received any reports of the flood at that time?
- A. Well, as I'd come in from the air base, 'course they were mentioning, some of the trailer houses, be sure you evacuate, they said along Rapid Creek, the was rising. Well, this happened quite, quite fast. The water, almost, you could see it coming, encroaching upon you. And then standing up in the front yard, this front steps of Bennet-Clarkson Hospital, I suppose five minutes or so, you could see cars out in front, headlights on, people in them, just starting to drift down. And about that time two houses came by and hit the Emco station right there by Bennet-Clarkson Hospital and, of course, at this time I realized we were, we were in trouble. Some people from the hospital said that they were

going to have to seal off the lower floors of the hospital, so please come upstairs. So those that were standing there went up the stairs. I suppose we were getting six or eight inches of water in the first floor of Bennet-Clarkson Hospital at this time. And, of course, they didn't want the patients disturbed, so once we started upstairs we kept pretty quiet. I went to the waiting room of the third floor of the Bennet-Clarkson Hospital, and was about the only person there, and that was really grandstand view, to see all this debris and the houses and cars coming down.

Q. Was there _____ power at this time so there were lights that. . . ?

A. Toward the First National Bank of Black Hills, Mountain View, Mountain View office still had lights on. And of course there was quite a little lightening. And this illuminated the area.

Q. In the hospital, was there light at that time or do they have an auxiliary. . . ?

A. No, no, lights were out in the hospital. So this was kind of a grandstand view to see these houses go by, and was raining quite heavy. It's hard to realize how much time did go by, but things did start to slow down later. I, say, I have no idea, I suppose at least after midnight. And the rain did start to let up a little bit, and I could start, I could hear voices calling for help then, coming from the area of Rapid Creek. I did _____ down the back stairways and at this time the water was still on the main floor of the hospital and I came over to my office then. I was able to wade through the water, and I had a camper trailer, and I was gonna get some Coleman lights to take to the hospital. I got back with the lights and someone said that they thought there was a gas leak, so I took the Coleman lanterns back to the office. I'm a scuba diver and I had my scuba equipment here, so I just put on a wet suit, maybe to

act as a life preserver, and went back to the hospital, and there was a call out for boats. A boat did show up and the motor wouldn't start. I say, it seems like hours go by. Finally we did get a boat that was working, and fellow driving the boat, two others went out then to do what we could to get these people. There was quite a pile of debris right at the Canyon Lake Bridge at Baken Park, and two of us climbed out there, walked across the debris trying to answer people. We did. . .young Vanderbeek youngster out of a tree there, _____ him back and put him in a boat. I stayed on this pile of debris looking for survivors. I could hear people whistling and hollering from a rooftop which looked like it was just about setting in the middle of Rapid Creek. There was very little light and an awful lot of debris and I was completely disoriented. I, it turned out that it was the Baldwin brick house that was still standing firm and there were people up there. But a tremendous current going there and just couldn't get over there with a boat, so more or less trying to tell them to stay where they were, and we would get to them when we could. I think they were rescued from the other end of Canyon Lake Drive, 'cause afterwards they were gone and I'm sure they were not lost. While I was on this pile of debris looking for people, the boat then went and took people out of houses that had floated into the parking area behind Bennet-Clarkson Hospital. Then, of course, I was anxious by my family, I could see by the headlights of cars that I had at least my home yet on Canyon Lake Drive, and after we did what we could on rescuing people the boat took me across the channel and let me out in Canyon Lake Drive and I got home about 2 a.m. on Saturday.

Q. Now, your family was all right.

A. Yes.

- Q. And you suffered any property damage there?
- A. No. Just a little sewage back up in fact. The children were asleep and didn't know anything was going on, and wife wasn't aware at all that it was anything this serious.
- Q. Did you continue on in this, this capacity assisting in rescue operations Saturday? You say it's about 2 o'clock Saturday afternoon.
- A. No, this was Saturday, a.m..
- Q. In the morning, I see. I see.
- A. And, of course, I was quite tired. I did come up over to the office then on Saturday morning and on both Saturday and Sunday I was over to the water treatment plant trying to clean the intake vents and get that operational. I, that was about the extent of my capacity in the scuba diving end of it, was over at the water treatment plant and did no extreme search.
- Q. Now, at . . .at the treatment plant did you have to dive over there and cleaning out those apparatus _____ ?
- A. I was a little familiar with this intake area. Two years ago a youngster drowned in Rapid Creek and we were searching that area, and _____ the inlet going into the water treatment plant is about ten inches, an opening about ten inches high by, I would say, probably five or six feet in length. These have at about a four inch interval it had corrugated steel bars to keep the debris from this inlet. These bars were all gone. The inlet of the water treatment plant has a rotating stream which the power had, had knocked out, and of course, quite a little debris got back into this mesh, this screen pretty well plugging the intake. And there's a, almost like a culvert that carries the water then a few hundred feet into the water treatment plant itself, and there's a big

reservoir, almost like a swimming pool inside where the inlets will lift the water out. A lot of debris had, that had come through was plugging the inlets of these pumps. An awfully lot of silt and _____ there was to try to keep the inlets free. They would shut a pump and then we would pull small twigs and leaves, _____ was plugging the intake pumps.

Q. I see. Now, the water treatment plant here is that the plant that treats the, purifies the drinking water for the city.

A. Yes.

Q. ~~see~~ I see. I see. So there was time then, when pure water was not available, I suppose until operations were restored there at. . . .

A. Yes, I'm sure, I'd say this was a matter of a few days.

Q. Yes. Now, going back to that night, you, you say that you rescued a boy, a young fellow who was in a tree out here. . . .

A. Yes.

Q. How was about, what was his age, approximately?

A. I think he was the one surviving Vanderbeek youngster, I think he's ten. He was very, very cold, and he said that he hadn't seen his parents. We tried to cheer him up and tell him that I'm sure his parents were more worried about him than he was his parents.

Q. Yeah. Yeah, surely, surely. Okay, Dr. Johnson, anything else then, your experience or your role in this operation that. . . .

A. Well, I guess I did do a little bit on Saturday morning on Rapid Creek, the Wrigley Drive area was isolated. They were trying to move people from the Wrigley Drive across to Rapid Creek which was still quite, running quite heavy in a light boat that they would transfer people back and forth, they had a

rope passed across the creek and they would (hand-by-hand) move this boat back. And I say, I was downstream a little ways, in case the boat would capsize, I would at least try to help someone.

- Q. I see. You were out, you were out on the water for a time again in the boat then, Friday night. You are an experienced boatman, though, I assume, you were. . . .
- A. Yes, I did know _____ driving the boat, but it was very, very difficult for this young fellow that was doing the driving, with all the debris and the current and to even stop, for instance, on this pile of debris, the water was going by very heavy and to stop to unload us and to put the survivors back on, you could easily get your motor to die. And if you hit some debris and the motor would die, I'm sure he'd have been swept down quite a ways.
- Q. I see. Okay, well, thank you then Dr. Johnson, for this interesting and informative tape.
- A. Thank you, sir.