

587

SOUTH DAKOTA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Library Cataloguing Service Data

Name of Informant Russell Rantapaa
Address Box 94 Nemo Rte, Deadwood, South Dakota
Date of Interview June 27, 1972
Name of Researcher Earl Hausle
Others Present Mrs. Russel Rantapaa and 3 children and one child who was a guest.
Location of Interview Russell Rantapaa home

Added Notes Newspaper account indicates that this was the body of Maxine Savely, the 229th victim located. Location of body - SE 1/4, NW 1/4, Sect. 6, R. 8 E, T 1 N., directly west of Pennington County Fairgrounds.

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

Rapid City flood search and rescue and debris removal; Finding a body, 6/26/72.

See June 23, 1972 issue of Life magazine, Vol. 72, No. 24 Page 27 for story on Mrs.

Maxine Savely. Tells where she lived and also about events leading up to the flood.

Demographic Information on Informant

Age 38 Sex Male County Lawrence

Socio-economic status lower middle class

Occupation Logging trucker

Education high school graduate

Religion Protestant

Date of Arrival of Family in South Dakota _____

Where? _____

From where? _____

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

- Q. June 27, 1972, Earl Hausle interviewing Russell Rantapaa. This interview is taking place in Russell Rantapaa's home, and how far is this from Rapid City?
- A. Oh, I imagine it's about 30 miles.
- Q. Now, the day that the rains came that caused the flood in Rapid City, you were working on logging project at what place?
- A. Down close to the, what they call the old town of Silver City.
- Q. And what was their experience with those rains that afternoon?
- A. Well, we went back to the woods about 4:30 in the evening, and it was, they'd put some water boys in the road and we got stuck, and then we got up on this fairly high mountain, we loaded up the truck and it started raining. We had two trucks up there. And before we got loaded we decided we'd better get outta there, so we left the one truck, and we started the "cat" when we got stuck getting up into there, and so then we got out..after we got the truck loaded, we, I followed with the "cat", and by that time it was raining really hard, you couldn't hardly see to drive. And we drove from there up to what they call Trout Haven. And we stopped at that little store there, and it rained, well, it was raining so hard we couldn't hardly see to drive. And we stayed there for probably an hour or better, I think we probably got back home here about, oh, 7:00, 7:30. And it had quit raining here, and we didn't have really too much rain--I don't know how many inches, but I know our little creek wasn't over the bank.
- Q. Have you ever experienced rain this heavy or this hard that you can remember before?
- A. No, I don't believe I have, as there was down there. No, I, I really don't think I have.

- Q. Now, you indicated we, you were referring to who else?
- A. My brother was with me. Jack.
- Q. Well, the next day when you found out that there had been a serious flood in Rapid City, what did you do then?
- A. Well, we, we did drive down to Highway 40 and could tell just by looking there that there must have been an awful lot of water (in Rapid). And actually we didn't do anything that day. That evening, DeeDee Gear, she said something about we should bring our trucks down to Rapid and help search for bodies and so forth. So I went...that would, that would be on Sunday morning, we went out to the woods to try to get the one truck that we'd left out there, and we started the same "cat" up again, and we got about halfway up that hill and we got the "cat" stuck. It just, there was just no bottom to that ground, and it's a steep hillside. And so then we, I come back and I went to Rapid with Jack in his truck and we worked down there that day, searching for bodies and so forth. Then the next Monday I spent all day gettin' that "cat" out with tow other guys and gettin' the truck out, we just had to more or less skid it out. We broke cables, and they was just..really soft. And the road was washed, and..then, let's see, that was Monday. Monday we didn't get the truck out. Tuesday was when we finally got the truck out, 'cause we broke the cable on the "cat". And then Wednesday I went down to Rapid with the truck, and started working down there.
- Q. Exactly what kind of equipment was on the truck that made it valuable for search and rescue operations? Can you describe the truck and the equipment?
- A. Well, it's, it's a Kenworth truck with the, with a Prentis loader on it. And they use these loaders for loading logs and pulpwood. It's a loader that

gotta kind of like a grapple on it, or a..like a small drive line is how they're made. And what they were good for down there was where the logs and trees and mud and stuff is washed up against buildings and against trees and so forth, you can lower this grapple there and pick that stuff outta there. And what we're doing right now is loading trucks. But before we was mainly looking for bodies the first few days.

Q. Now the first day that you were down there which would then have been Sunday?

A. Yes.

Q. In, in what areas did you work?

A. Uh, first we went up, I think what they call it Cleghorn Springs, or Dark Canyon, I don't know exactly which, which it is, and, uh...

Q. Is it the area above the fish hatchery?

A. It's just..no, it's just before you get to the fish hatchery and to the right.

Q. That's Cleghorn Canyon.

A. Yeah. That's where we went first, with, oh, the dogs and I think..no, Sunday we didn't, no, no, that day there was no dogs. No, we was down, fairly close to that Witte's beverage outfit there.

Q. Down in the eastern part of Rapid City.

A. That's, that's right.

Q. More toward the fairgrounds.

A. That's right. And we spent practically all of our day down there; we worked 'til..we got down there at, I think we started about 6:00, and we quit at 6:00. That was the first day. That's right. That's, we just worked in that area and I don't know what the man's name was that we worked with.

Q. Then when you got your own truck out I think you got another call by then to

come back down, (didn't you)?

A. Yes, sir. That's right. And..well, I guess it was DeeDee that called, that, that's who called in. And then we were, then I reported to the courthouse, and that's when I went out with the dogs, so then we went up to Cleghorn Springs; and we only worked there for about two hours, and they decided that it'd washed that so clean that they didn't think that there was anything up there. And then we went down, well, pret' near, I imagine to the city limits, on the fairground or down that end, probably outside of the city limits actually, and worked along the creek down in that area.

Q. Now, where were these dogs from that you were working with?

A. They was from Cascade County I believe was, is the ones that we worked with.

Q. In Montana that is.

A. That's right.

Q. We had several groups of dogs in, so...

A. Yeah, that, that's where they was from.

Q. Okay.

A. But we didn't, didn't find anything that day. And so..and then that was the only day I worked with them.

Q. And then after that, what have you been up to?

A. After that, then I went to Summits, and they hired me at, at Summits there, and I've been working with them ever since.

Q. Summit Construction has the area from...

A. West Boulevard to the city limits.

Q. Yeah, West Boulevard east, yeah. So..you've been working every day then...

A. Yeah, we've put in 12 hours every day except one day it, it rained fairly

hard and only worked four hours that day.

Q. Now, how many bodies have you found yourself?

A. Well, I just found the one body, and that was yesterday, woulda been the 26th. And that was by this, Witte's beverage company. Fact, it was only about 40 feet, from the, from the main office there. And there was a, a road right, right by it, and there's a nursery there, can't think what the name of that is. But, anyway there's just a small, I don't believe, it's just kind of like a small park or there's just a row of trees, and just a small impression in there like an old creek or something but it's never had water in ti. And it was only approximately 20 feet wide, the whole road, and I loaded, oh, a truck and a half outta there in this one area where it was kind of piled up, tree limbs and mud and silt and, well, just a little bit of everything. There was tires and all kinds of stuff. And I had a couple laborers workin' with me, and they'd been cuttin' these little trees that was bent, and, and we was all in that area, and we never smelled anything or anything, but all of a sudden, I, I had this body in the grapple and that's when we called the police department and come down and got it.

Q. I think you said a minute ago that one of the laborers who was working with you thought that you had seen the body because you picked the body right up in the grapple.

A. Well, that's right, I did. I didn't realize that it was a body, and I, to tell the truth, I kind of forgot about it. Forgot about the bodies, you know, because I hadn't found any, and I was just busy loadin' the trucks, and what I really thought it was was a mattress. 'Cause there was a lot of mattresses and that kind of stuff that's been washed around and it just didn't look like

anything, and I just reached down in there and I, for some reason I didn't squeeze it or nothing, and it just come out, and I believe in pretty good shape. 'Course, then, I didn't look at it that much. I know it was big and that was all.

Q. What was the reaction of the, of the fellows who were working who were out on the ground in the area?

A. Well, the one boy, I suppose he's 17, 18..he run up ahead of the truck, and he was the one who had the power saw, and he was fairly close there. And he just kind of plumb left the country, and actually, after I set the body down on the ground, why, I kind of left myself, too. And one of the truckers had been overseas--must have been in the Navy--it didn't seem to bother him too much, he, he didn't want no part of it either, you know, he didn't go look; but there was, surprisingly, quite a few that did go over and look.

Q. Did you go call the people then to come and get...?

A. I, I went over to the office there and, it must be Witte himself, I told him and I asked him if he would call and he called. And I just waited there for 'em. Well, we all did. And they was there just..real fast. A couplea minutes.

Q. Today, were you operating with some anxiety then as you worked on debris?

A. Uh, today I had a little bit different job, I, I knew I wouldn't find any bodies today 'cause I was tearing down houses, and they'da been all checked through. And, it wasn't, just happened that that's..but I, I did, I was able to go right back and, and dig through the stuff and didn't, I hoped that I wouldn't find anymore, but I didn't, I don't think it slowed me down any, really, either.

- Q. Are there any marks or anything in the area that you've noticed that could tell you how high the water was in that area as it flowed through from the flood?
- A. Well, I, I believe the water must have been about eave high on the houses, there was some houses that's just, well, they're right close to the creek actually, and this isn't actually very far from the creek either, probably 50 yards at the most. Orright about 50 yards. And there's some houses that's right next to the creek and we did notice that the water had been about eave high on 'em. Well, that a little further from that. But I don't really notice on the trees so much, but I know that the little trees, the ones ten and twelve feet high, that they're bent over real bad, and that's why we cut 'em off, because they was full of paper and all that kind of stuff, and there's just no way you could clean 'em out. So it's..there was fenders in there and a car hood, and three truck tires and I don't know how many car tires, and.. well, there's just about anything--oil, drums of oil and all kinds of, just about anything you can think of was in there, actually. So I don't know where there's..there's silt in that area, it's four feet deep, I believe, so it's just hard to say where they could..I know it's four feet deep, too, 'cause it's just..in places it's just really piled up.

(END OF INTERVIEW)

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE:

Although Russell Rantapaa didn't know the identity of the body he'd found on Money, June the 26th of 1972, the Rapid City Journal that day indicates on page 1 in an article indicating that two more bodies had been found, br..

to bring the death toll of the flood to 229. That the body found Sunday by Russell Rantapaa near LaCrosse Street was that of Maxine Savly or Savely. Spelled M-A-X-I-N-E, first name Maxine; S-A-V-E-L-Y, last name. And that was the 229th body found. The map of the area indicates that the body was found in the southeast quarter of the northeast, northwest quarter of Section 6, Range 8 East, Township 1 North of the Black Hills Meridian, directly west of the Pennington County Fairgrounds.

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Mrs. Russel Rantapaa and 3 children and one child who was a guest.

Russell Rantapaa home

Newspaper account indicates that this was the body of Maxine Savely, the 229th victim located. Location of body - SE 1/4, NW 1/4, Sect. 6, R. 8 E, T 1 N., directly west of Pennington County Fairgrounds.

Rapid City flood search and rescue and debris removal; Finding a body, 6/26/72.

See June 23, 1972 issue of Life magazine, Vol. 72, No. 24 Page 27 for story on Mrs. Maxine Savely. Tells where she lived and also about events leading up to the flood.

38

Male

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Protestant

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- Q. And what was their experience with those rains that afternoon?
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- Q. Have you ever experienced rain this heavy or this hard that you can remember before?
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- Q. Now, you indicated we, you were referring to who else?
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- Q. Well, the next day when you found out that there had been a serious flood in Rapid City, what did you do then?
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RR ~~Oh~~ I imagine ^{it's} about 30 miles.

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RR Down close to ^{the} what they call ~~the~~ ^{the} old town of Silver City.

EH And what was their experience with those rains that afternoon?

RR Well, we went back to the woods about 4:30 in the evening, and ~~it was~~ ^{it was} they'd put some water boys in the road and we got ~~stuck~~ ^{stuck}, and then we got up on this fairly high mountain, we loaded up the truck and it started raining. We had two trucks up there. And before we got loaded we decided we'd better get out ~~of~~ ^{to} there, so we left the one truck, and we started the "cat" when we got ~~xxx~~ stuck getting ^{up} into there, and so then we got out ~~..~~ after we got the truck loaded, we, I followed with the "cat," and by that time it was raining really hard, you couldn't hardly see to drive. And we drove from there up to what they call Trout Haven. And we stopped at that little store there, ^{and} it rained, well, it was raining so hard we couldn't hardly see to drive. ^{And} ~~We~~ ^{i.e.} stayed there for probably an hour or better, I think we probably got back home here about, oh, 7, 7:30. And it had quit raining here, and we didn't have really too much rain, ~~=~~ I don't know how many inches, but I know our little creek wasn't over the bank.

EH Have you ever experienced rain this heavy or this hard that you can remember before?

RR No, I don't believe I have, ~~As~~ ^{As} there was down there. No, I, I really don't think I have.

EH Now, you indicated we, you were refering ^{to} to who else?

RR My brother was with me. Jack.

EH Well, the next day when you ~~fixed~~ found out that there had been a serious flood in Rapid City, what did you do then?

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- RR down to Rapid and help search for bodies and so forth. So I went ^{that would,} that would be on Sunday morning, we went out to the woods to try to get the one truck that we'd left out there, and ^{we started} ~~just drove~~ the same "cat" up again, and we got about halfway up that hill and we got the "cat" stuck. ^{It just} ~~There~~ was just no bottom to that ground, and it's a steep hillside. And so ^t ~~then~~ we, I come back and I went to Rapid with Jack in his truck and we worked ~~down there~~ that day, searching for bodies and so forth. Then the next Monday I spent all day getting ^{'s} that "cat" out with two other guys and getting ^{'s} the truck out, we just had to more or less ^{skid} ~~(skid)~~ it out. ~~X~~ ^{We broke} cables, and they was just..really soft. And the road was washed, and.. Then, ^{let's} see, that ws Monday. Monday we didn't get the truck out. Tuesday was when we finally got ~~the~~ the truck out, ^{'s} cause we broke the cable on the "cat." And then Wednesday I went ~~to~~ down to Rapid with the truck, ^{'s} and started ~~going~~ working ~~down~~ there.
- EH Exactly what kind of equipment was on the truck that made it valuable for search and rescue operations? Can you describe the truck and the equipment?
- RR Well, it's, it's a ^{'s} (Kenworth) truck with the, with ^{'s} ~~za~~ ^{Pacatis} (Premise) loader on it. And they use these loaders for ^{'s} loading logs and pulpwood. It's a loader, ^{that} ~~it's~~ got kind of like a grapple on it, or ^{'s} like a small ^{'s} (drive line) ^{'s} ~~Is~~ how they're made. ^{'s} and what they were good for down there ^{'s} ~~is~~ where the logs and trees and mud and stuff is washed up against buildings and against trees and so forth, ^{'s} ~~we~~ can lower this grapple ^{'s} ~~there~~ and pick that stuff out ^{'s} ~~of~~ there. And what we're doing right now is loading trucks. ^{'s} ~~Before~~ ^{But} ~~me~~ was mainly looking for bodies, ^{'s} the first few days.
- EH Now the firstday that you were ~~down~~ down there which would then have been Sunday?
- RR Yes.
- EH In ^{'s} ~~in~~ what areas did you work?
- RR ^{'s} ~~First~~ we went up, I think what they call it Cleghorn Springs, ^{'s} ~~Or~~ Dark Canyon, I don't know exactly which, which it is, ^{'s} ~~and~~, uh...
- EH Is it ^{'s} ~~the area~~ above the fish hatchery ^{'s} ~~there~~?
- RR It's ^{'s} ~~no~~, it's just before you get to the fish hatchery and to the right.
- EH That's Cleghorn Canyon.
- RR Yeah. That's where we went first, with, oh, the ^{'s} ~~(dogs)~~ and I think...no, Sunday we didn't,

RR ^{no}, no, that day there was no dogs. No, we was down ~~at~~, fairly close to that ^{With's} beverage outfit there.

EH Down in the eastern part of Rapid City.

RR That's ^{that's} right.

EH More toward the fairgrounds.

RR That's right. And we spent practically all of our day down there; we worked 'till, we got down there at, I think we started about ^{6:00} six, ^{i.e.} And we quit at six.

EH ^{RR} THAT was the first day.

RR That's right. ~~That's~~ That's, we just worked in that area and I don't know what the man's name was that we worked with.

EH Then when you got your own truck out I think you got another call by then to come back down, ^(didn't you?)

RR ^{yessir.} That's right. And, well, I guess it was DeDe that called, ^{that, that's who} ~~(Brad Branson)~~ called in⁸.

And then we were, then I reported to the courthouse, and that's when I went out with the dogs, so then we went up to Cleghorn Springs; and we only worked there for about two hours, and they decided ~~that~~ it'd washed that so clean that they didn't think ^{that} there was anything up there. And then we went down, well, pretty ¹ near, I imagine to the city limits, on the fairground or down that end, probably outside of the city limits actually, And worked along the creek down in that area.

EH Now, where were these dogs from that you were working with?

RR They was from Cascade ~~(RR)~~ ^{is} (County) I believe was, the ones that we worked with.

EH In Montana that is.

RR That's right.

EH We had several groups of dogs in, so..

RR Yeah, that, that's where they was from.

EH Okay.

RR But we didn't, didn't find anything that day. And so.. ^{then} and that was the only day I worked with them.

EH And then after that, what ^{have} ^{have up to} did you ?

RR After that, then I went to Summits, and they hired me ^{at} Summits there, and I've been working with them ever since.

EH Summit's ~~construction~~ construction has the area from..

RR West Boulevard to the city limits.

EH ^{Yeah,} West Boulevard east, yeah. So..you've been working every day then..

RR Yeah, we ^{me} put in 12 hours every day except one day it ^{it} rained fairly hard and only worked four hours ^{that day.}

E H Now, how many bodies have you found, yourseff?

RR Well, I just found the one body, and that was yesterday, would ~~have~~ been the 26th. And that was by this, ~~where these bodies were~~ ^{Witte's} (Whitey's) beverage company. Fact, it was only about 40 feet ^{from the} from the main office, ~~xxxxxx~~ there. And there was a ^{a road right,} row of ~~s~~ right by it, and there's a nursery there, can't think what ~~the~~ the name of that is. Well, ^{But} anyway there's just a small, I don't believe, it's just kind of like a small park or ^{there's} just a row of trees ^{and}, just a small impression in there like an old creek or ~~something~~ but it's never had water in it. ^{and} It was only approximately 20 feet wide, the whole row ^{ad}, and I loaded oh, a truck and a half ^{outta} ~~on it~~ there in this one area where it was kind of piled up, tree limbs and mud and silt and , well, just a little bit of everything. There was tires and all kinds of stuff. And I had a couple laborers ^{working} moving with me, and they'd been cutting ⁱ these little trees that was bent, and , and ^{we was} all in that area, and we never smelled anything or anything, but all of a sudden, ^I I had this body in the grapple and that ^{is was} when we called the police department and come down ^{and got it,} ~~come down~~ [→]

EH I think you said a minute ago that one of the laborers who was working with you thought that you had seen the body because you picked the body right up in the grapple.

RR Well, that's right, I did. I didn't realize that it was a ~~body~~ body, and I, to tell the truth, I kind of forgot about it. Forgot about the bodies, you know, ^{he} cause I hadn't found any, and I was just busy ^{loadin' the} ~~working~~ trucks, and what I really thought it was was a mattress. 'Cause there was a lot of mattresses and that kind of stuff that's been washed ^{around} ~~out~~ down, and it just didn't look like anything, and I just reached ~~xxxxxx~~ down in there ^{and I,} ~~and~~ for some reason I didn't squeeze it or nothing, ^{and it} just come out, and I believe

RR in pretty good shape. 'Course, then, I didn't look at it that ~~xxxxx~~ much. I know it was big, *and that was all.*

EH What was the reaction of the, of the fellows who were working who were ~~xxxxx~~ *out* on the ground in the area?

RR Well, the one boy, I suppose he's 17, 18.. *He* ~~run~~ *i.e.* up ahead of the truck, and he was the one who had the power saw, and he was fairly close there. And he just kind of plumb left the country, and actually, after I set the body down on the ground, why, I kind of left myself, too. And one of the truckers had been overseas, ~~must~~ have been in the Navy, ~~=~~ it didn't seem to bother him too much, ~~he~~, he said he'd seen ~~a~~ lot of stuff like that. But most of the., the other trucker, he, he didn't want ~~no~~ part of ~~it~~ either, you know, he didn't go look; but there was, surprisingly, quite a few that did go over and look.

EH Did you go call the people then to come and get..

RR I, I went over to the office there and, it must be ~~(Whatey)~~ *Witte* himself, I told him ~~that,~~ *and* I aksed him if he would call and he called. And I just waited there for ~~them.~~ *!* Well, we all did. And they was there just..real fast. A couple *a* minutes.

EH Today, were you operating with some anxiety then *as you worked on* debris?

RR *Uh,* ~~Well,~~ today I had a little bit different job, I, I knew I wouldn't find any bodies today 'cause I was tearing down houses, and they'd ~~been~~ *And* all checked through. *So,* it wasn't, just happened that that's...but I, I did, I was able to go right back and, and dig through the stuff and didn't, I hoped that I wouldn't find anymore, but I didn't, I don't think it slowed me down any, really, either.

EH Are there any marks or anything in the area that you've noticed that could tell you how high the water was in that area as it flowed through from the flood?

RR Well, I, I believe the water must have been about ~~eave~~ *And* high on the houses, there was some houses that's just, well, they're right close to the creek actually, and this ~~xx~~ isn't actually very far from the creek either, probably 50 yards at the most. ~~Orxxxxx...~~ *And* right about fifty yards. *i.e.* There's some houses that's right next to the creek and we did notice that the water had been about eave high on ~~them.~~ *Well, that a little* further from that. But I don't really notice on the trees so much, but I know ~~the low~~ *that the little* trees, the *ones* ten and twelve feet high, that they're bent over real bad, and that's why

RR ^{we} cut ~~it's~~ them off, because they was full of paper and all that kind of stuff, ^{and there's} just noway
you could clean ~~it~~ them out. So it's ..there was fenders in there and a ~~car~~ hood, and three
truck tires ^{and I don't know how many car} tires, and ^{well, there's} ~~oh~~ just about anything — Oil, drums of oil and all kinds
of , just about anything you can think of was in there, actually. So I ^{don't know where there's} went
^{there's} the silt in that area, it's four feet deep, I ^{believe} think, so it's just hard to say where they
could. I know it's four feet deep, too, ^{because it's just..} In places it's just really piled up.
(End of Interview)

PH (Afterwards) — Although Russel Rantapaa didn't know the identify of the body he'd found
Interviewer's NOTE:
on Monday, June the ² 16th of 1972, the Rapid City Journal that day indicates on page 1
in an article indicating that ^{two} 2 more bodies ^{had} been found, ^{to} bring the death toll
of the flood to 229. That the body found Sunday by Russel Rantapaa near ~~the~~ LaCrosse
Street was that of Maxine Savly or Savely. Spelled M-a-x-i-ne, first name Maxine;
S-a-v-e-l-y, last name. ^{but} That was the 229th body found. The map of the area indicates
that the body was found in the southeast quarter of the ^{l.c.} ^{northeast,} northwest quarter of section 6,
range 2xxxx 8 east, township 1 north of the Black Hills Meridian, directly west of the
Pennington County fairgrounds.