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Blair K. Siepert – Life during the Flood

By Blair K. Siepert

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Oral Interview conducted by Jessica Wilkinson

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
JW: This is March second, and I am interviewing Blair Siepert and about the Teton dam flood. And my first question is, tell me a little bit about yourself, your career and your family.

BS: Okay, I was born and raised in the area and so was my wife. We were high school sweethearts and married when I got out of the service in 1960. We have a family of two boys and a girl. All married and left the house by now, and we have ten grandchildren, we have it all.

JW: You said you were in the service?

BS: Back then you had to go six months and six years in the guard. Either that or two years in the draft, so I spent six years in the regular armed forces in Fort Knox Kentucky and San Francisco.

JW: Did your family go with you?

BS: No, it was before I was married. When I got back I got married. My position at the time of the flood was the Chief of Police of the department; we had about twenty officers’ downtown, and about ten on campus, so we had a total of 30 officers. So as a chief of police in Idaho you are working under the direction of the mayor and the council. The mayor appoints you as chief of police, you’re not elected as so. I’m appointed to that position by the mayor, and I serve at his will. You could get fired any day of the week. Anyway, so I served a total of 32 years in law enforcement. I started out as deputy sheriff, worked for the sheriff’s department here locally. It involves all of the county in your jurisdiction. The Idaho state police, I spent a year with them, with the highway port of entry, which is weighing trucks and put out in patrol cars, and had I stayed—but after a year I was approached by the mayor who had just won the election to replace the old mayor and [he] wanted me to become the assistant chief of police. I had known him for a number of years and anyway, I was not going to stay with the state, it was not my thing. I wasn’t a traffic officer, which is more what they do. I like more of the investigation, that’s my type of thing. So, I was going to quit law enforcement, so if he hadn’t approached me, I probably would have got out. But he approached me, and I took that position and was the assistant chief of police for two years and then after that was appointed chief of police.

JW: So, what responsibilities did you have as chief of police?

BS: Well, my responsibility was in charge of all the officers downtown as well as on campus, the college officers. And of course maintaining 24 hour coverage for the city patrol and so on, doing investigations on crime, and then we had patrol officers, investigators and so forth. And organizing and maintaining that type of operation. And so we, and I always felt that we had a good department. We were younger, but what we lacked in experience, we made for in dedication. And later on, as we, I had four to five, five officers of mine graduate from the FBI national academy, which is unheard of in Idaho. Most of the larger departments only had two or three. But I was, I worked with
the FBI on a number of occasions, and one of my best friends was an FBI agent and because of that we got quickly involved in the academy. And myself and four other officers graduated from that, and I felt good about that and of course we had training, locally and from around the state. Took college courses and report writing and so on, and of course continued our education and by the end of my career, most of our guys had a four year degree. And that again for the size of the department was more than average.

JW: So, going to the flood, that day, what were you doing before you heard about it? What were your plans for that day?

BS: On the day of the flood, my brother-in-law is a masonry contractor, and it wasn’t unusual that when I had a day off I would go help him with a masonry job for extra money. But anyway, he called and asked me if I would help him and go up to the Teton Basin, which is above the Teton Dam about fifteen, twenty miles. Up above there he was doing a fireplace for a cabin, a home that was being built up there. And so I told him, “Okay, let’s do that,” and then we’ll take the canoes and after this job, we’ll get done around noon and we’ll put the canoes in below the dam and fish the river, because we used to fish it all the time, because the word was they were going to start letting the water out and the river wasn’t going to be a natural stream anymore. And so that’s what we were going to do, and so that morning about four o’clock in the morning we was going to go out to work. And we drove over to the dam and we observed the dam and there was a lot of debris in it. We were quite surprised that they left all that debris in it. We thought that once it floated down to the dam they would pull all of that out.

JW: Now there was debris on the…?

BS: The water side. And what they’d done, they’d cut all that timber down from the canyon with the idea that later they were going to haul that out with trucks. But, that’s normal in that case that they’ll clear-cut the timber to the water level. There was a lot of this debris floating, and the water was really high, and we were wondering why they hadn’t started letting out water. Because it seemed higher than what it should be, but hey, we’re not the engineers. So we left and went up and done this job. About noon this guy came out and said, “Y’all are from Rexburg aren’t ya?”, and we said “yeah,” and he said, “Well, the Teton dam just broke.” And so of course we left what we were doing ‘cause I knew I’d have a great responsibility and needed to get home as soon as possible and to line up my crews and so on. And I know this country very well, and you know we thought well we can’t drive down the old highway ‘cause it will be flooded, and it wasn’t at that point, we would have made it, but as you get to a point the road was washed out. So we went across the dry farm area, which is over the mountains behind Ricks College. And came across there and in doing so, coming out across Teton Basin we were able to see a lot of dust which surprised me ‘cause when you think of a flood, we don’t think of a lot of dust.

JW: Yeah, you think of lots of water.
BS: It was actually dusty ahead of the flood, and what it was doing was the canyon was full of cottonwood just like this ones out in front of my house that are a hundred feet tall, there was a lot of them in the canyon, and as the water got behind them and the debris would stack up it would knock these trees over and would create an actual dust storm ahead of it before the water got there. I didn’t anticipate this, having not been in a flood before. I’ve been in small flood you know with runoff water and so on.

JW: So, when you first heard about it what were your first thoughts, your first reactions?

BS: Well you know, I guess my first thought was we’re gonna get flooded. We’ll have clear water from the Teton River, ‘cause the Teton has really clear water up in the mountains, and you know, I hadn’t really thought about all the mud and the debris that come with it. I thought it would just be clear water, which was a big surprise.

JW: Were you very worried?

BS: Yeah, I was. Because I thought, I need to go check on the wife. We had just moved into this house just two years before. Before that we lived in the city of Rexburg, and I thought we’re probably okay where we’re at now. But anyway, obviously I was concerned about her and the kids, but as soon as I got into town I had this brother-in-law drop me off at the station, and we had all the police officers notified. And by then, I had some of my senior men there, and we got all the patrol cars out. We [had] salvaged all the equipment thinking we’d be wiped out, and we were pretty well wiped out. But we salvaged all the cars and got them out.

JW: Was the police station in the same spot that it is today?

BS: No, it was up on the courthouse corner and so the building sits up a little higher. But, we were about four to five feet off the ground, and by the end we had about two to three feet of water in our offices. And so they survived, but of course the files and things didn’t. We got organized and then we started to clear the city, you know those people who might be disabled, a lot of them that might have problems getting out, and so we started on the loud speaker clearing everybody out. And we were successful at doing that, and we got some out that neighbors had forgotten about and that sort of thing. The big surprise was, and we got to the animals at the fairground, opened the gates and drove them out. And horses that people hadn’t thought [about] and turned them loose. We don’t know if they survived or not. And as the water came down you could see, we had about three hours ‘til the water got down to Rexburg. It’s about eighteen miles from the dam so we had plenty of time, not a lot of time. And so, as the water started coming in another thing I hadn’t thought about in a flood is that the houses heated with natural gas or propane, if them tanks hadn’t been shut off, which most of them hadn’t been then as the water raised and washed the house away they would disconnect and then explosions and fires and so on, and the West part of town below where Kmart is now in that area there were fires down there where the water was six to eight feet high, burning buildings and so on, fuel tanks and things down there. And there, there’s no way you can get at
them, so there were plenty of things down there that did burn. There was really nothing it was hurting.

JW: So, describe what the city looked like.

BS: Well by dark, and the flood came in town by three o’clock, by dark we had water as high as it would get, and on Main Street it might be two to four feet, and then about a block down it would be about six to eight feet because the debris all these trees and logs would back up about twenty feet. And it would back the water up, and then we’d have a surge of water with houses floating down Main Street, full houses, and then it took everything down by the Teton River, trailer homes, there was two log mills, and there was thousands of truckloads of logs, and they would build up against a house or go straight through it was like a stick. It’d go clear through the home and be sticking out the other side and the debris would stack against them, and it’s just float away. And the golf course had fifteen houses on it the next morning. Porter Park had six to eight plus hundreds of truckloads of debris. You know where Porter Park is?

JW: Yeah, now were most of those homes from Rexburg or…?

BS: They were from the farming communities, Sugar City. They varied, but most of them, there were some homes I knew of that went as far as five to ten miles before they got lodged against something, most of them were only a mile or two from where they originally were. There were some homes in the Moody area, the area between Sugar City and Rexburg, you know that area? It looked worse than [of] a bomb went off because of all the debris, and the clear water I was thinking about ended up being feet of mud.

JW: Now was the mud thick or runny?

BS: It was slick and slimy to begin with, but as it sat in the houses it became like cement. And you’d pick away at it, and it was fine of silt, and see, it took away all the top soil in the canyon clear to the bed rock. There was an inch or two of this topsoil and it just washed that away and it ended up in homes and stores. My mother and dad’s home, I took them out there the second day. They’re out in the Hibbard area, which is out there directly in the path. And we had mud in there above your knees and the water chest deep. The water is what did the damage. The mud just made a mess, tipped things upside down. And then in this mud there’s barrels and garbage and dead cows, I forget how many head of cows. I forget the numbers…

JW: It was in the thousands I think.

BS: 12,000 to 18,000 in homes, inside stores, in the debris piles there would be mangled cows. That was one of our first concerns, really. After the flood receded, cleaning up these cattle before disease and things set in, and as it turned out we anticipated about 150 human deaths as we met that first night and we set up a morgue on campus in the shop, we asked there permission to use that. So we anticipated about 150 deaths, but as it turned out there were only 11, and if this thing had happened at night we would have had
a lot more. We obviously would have lost more. There were some people trying to
recover property, and some of them got killed trying to get back to there homes, and got
washed off. We found them a few days later. I was in the helicopter the next few days,
and the National Guard brought in helicopter and put them in our control so we could use
them. I had about 150 National Guard assigned to me. So we put up security and about
the next night we had everything established for security. And I got in a helicopter the
afternoon of the next day and because we had an injured person out in Hibbard, where I
was born and raised, and they come in and asked does anyone know that area, we got to
rescue Ross Clements and I said yeah, I know it. Anyways I jumped in the helicopter and
flew out there, and I didn’t even recognize the place, the homes had all been relocated,
and I located the church building, which is across the street from my parents home, and
said to go back a mile. And we found the Clements and some other people with sickness.
And later we were looking for bodies on the Teton River in a smaller helicopter, we’d
seen herds of cattle that were still alive in debris piles. They were swinging their heads.
I had my service revolver and shotgun and he would hover over these cows and I’d shoot
‘em, put them out of their misery. And in a helicopter, it’s a great way to look for people
because you can get down there and the brush opens up, and you can see in there, but we
actually didn’t find any bodies that way, we found them on foot a few days later.

JW: So in the days following you went in the helicopter and things, when did you
actually start cleaning up?

BS: Well, as soon as the water receded, we had security, we had the State Police set up
security, so as not to let sightseers in. And we participated in the cleanup and the bank of
Main Street had a safe that had come out, and we had a truck come in with a winch and
pull it out. We recovered valuables; there was a coin collection in another bank, so we
secured that. And there were some local thieves that started hitting things up. We was
able to make arrests of them and there were some coming and stealing and we didn’t play
with that kind, we didn’t have time. We didn’t have any judges ‘cause we were flooded
so you had to take them to Fremont County or Bonneville, with support officers to
transport them. And there were some minor instances where we would deal with it on the
spot, and we’d take their information and tell them to get out of the area and not to come
back. And later on, followed up on that and made arrests on some cases. And my
officers worked fifty-eight hours straight the first day before they got a break and then we
went on twelve-hour shifts for the next two weeks, which turned out to be fourteen to
sixteen hours, and then we went back to eight hour. My responsibility is strictly civic and
my jurisdiction was the city of Rexburg, and the campus and all that. I said about the
crooks, but we mostly had our local ones, but as soon as that thing hit they would rob the
jewelry stores, but they did rob the movie stores and some other stores, but we caught
them.

JW: So what affect did it have on you personally, on your family? I mean other than you
were having to work all the time, what affect did that have having to be away from them?

BS: And that’s what’s interesting too ‘cause most people had their families to deal with,
and they had no jobs to go back to so they had time to deal with it. In my department
there was only two that their homes weren’t completely destroyed, and I was one of them. The water came clear up to the step, but that was all. My pond there had twelve truckloads of debris, but it didn’t enter the basement. So I had twenty-seven family members living in the house at the time for about three to five days, and one brother-in-law had a trailer house so we pulled him up the house here and plugged him in. The wife cooked for him in here while everyone else tried to salvage their homes, and they were all gone. And I have four brothers and two sisters and that were all wiped out for the most part, but Mother and Dad were mostly our worry. They were older in their 80s, and they were the priority, to get them back in a house. And this was June, and you’ve got until about October to do this. We had them back in a home by September, in a double wide home, and we built a foundation. And they lost everything, all their personal effects and things. And I took mother and dad out there on the second day, and we could barely make it out there through the water and debris. And the worst thing for them was seeing all the pictures floating around the front room, and I had two brothers that were killed in an accident. And I watched mom and dad, it just destroyed them ‘cause it was all their memories. There was a lot of personal hurts going on.

JW: You said you had the 27 family members staying here, for how long? You said your parents were in a house by September…?

BS: A week to ten days, and then they started getting into apartments while they started mucking their houses out. There was a feeling you wanted to get back into your home to protect your property and belongs.

JW: What role did the college play?

BS: Have you interviewed Mark Ricks yet?

JW: I haven’t yet, but I have read the interviews he gave.

BS: As far as I’m concerned, the college played a real critical role, ‘cause they were up on the hill and the next day they were serving 5,000 people. And that number probably went up to 5 to 10,000, that’s where we’d go to grab a sandwich. The other disaster relief, like the Red Cross they all sat up on the hill, and the police station relocated to the National Guard place up on the hill by the girls’ dorms, what’s now an alternative high school for about a month, then we were able to get back into our offices. Yeah, the college was a great help. I don’t know what we’d done with out them, then I guess we’d set up somewhere else. But they just took over, I fueled my police cars up at the college. We didn’t have any gas we didn’t have any nothing, you don’t think about the little things you don’t think about, like I didn’t have any uniforms and what you had on that was pretty important to be identified. And the Governor called and said, “What can we do over there Siepert?” What I need is uniform coveralls. I guess that wasn’t important enough for him.

JW: Did you not end up getting them?
BS: I did, but I had to get them myself. I got so disgusted with some of these politicians, they want to put on the show.

JW: And act like they care.

BS: Yeah, anyway, this FBI friend of mine lives in Idaho Falls, Bill Breens, he’s now retired, and I got a hold of him and I said, “Hey, do you mind going over to JC Penny, we need some coveralls ‘cause we were in mud up to our knees.” So we slapped some badges on there and called it good. So yeah, my kids, my son and my daughter, yeah, my daughter was about six years old and she broke out with the hives, ‘cause she was really nervous. And you don’t think that much about things like that, adults trying to worry about their problems, but this thing really affected the kids. And so there was a lot of this chemical reaction stuff people found in the mud and water when they were mucking out their houses.

JW: What kind of chemicals?

BS: Through the phosphate plants, they’d float through the mud and the water and you’d be wading around in it.

JW: Did you have a reaction?

BS: No, no I got exhausted and things like that and all the officers did. You’d come home and get three hours and go back, and you just run out, and that’s not wise, but you have to do it. You’re responsible and someone needs to be there, so you done it.

JW: What kinds of reactions would they have?

BS: Oh, blisters and sores and the kind you get from chemicals anyway. And there was some areas worse than others and at the time you don’t realize it ‘cause you’re covered in mud and debris.

JW: What was the government’s assistance in the clean-up, you mentioned a little bit about the politicians, but what was your experience with them?

BS: Well, you know I’m not saying they weren’t an asset, ‘cause they were. And certainly when FEMA, it’s federal housing, they come in and opened an office up on campus and started taking claims and giving assistance where it was needed, and that was really important. But then there was other agencies, like Arkansas, a bunch of people came with dump trucks, these people that follow disasters ‘cause of the money. And we had a Civil Defense organization in Madison County, and I was part of that and because of my position I had a position on that, and we had a committee that after the first hurdle, about four to five days, when it start cooling off a little and receding we said, “Hey we don’t need all these outsiders running trucks in this area, I mean we’ve got all these folks out of work now. So let’s get rid of this bunch of scabs,” and so we did. So we got the locals, the farmers, everybody around here has got dump trucks, and we got all of them
involved and that solved some of the problem. ‘Cause these creeps would come in and work about ten to twelve hours, and then they’d be thieving off of everyone else. And then there were other groups trying to justify their position wanting to know how many assistants they could bring to a certain area, and I finally told them to get out of my office and stay out. But most of them were there to do a good job. The Red Cross did a good job, but we didn’t need them ‘cause we had the college.

JW: And also the church, how helpful were they?

BS: Oh, unbelievable, and within hours, the government is slow, but the immediate, the bishops and the church is organized...home teaching, the visiting teaching, the bishop calls you, “Hey are you aware where families [are] at.” Right away you have an organization set up. And that’s the way it works. Our first meeting we thought, we won’t be able to let anybody back in for seventy-two hours because of the theft and stuff. I said, “That’s a bunch of bologna. Around here this isn’t a problem. We need them back in their areas to protect their homes.” They said we couldn’t do it, but we had people back in their homes in about twelve hours. Ones that could get there, and there was something salvageable. A lot of us could sit in the Civil Defense meetings year after year, but that’s just a starting point.

JW: Were there lasting effects on you, your family, the police department, the community? Was there something the flood did that was lasting?

BS: I think it does, probably everyone of those. Because [of] the disaster we are probably better off in a lot of ways than we may have been without it, new buildings, new homes. In a lot of ways, we lost history and valuable things. So it affects both ways, it probably affects old people worse, like I said Mother and Dad. And other old couples, they lost everything in their place. So there’s a problem there. It personally changed me. I was less active; I wasn’t really going to church. And President Kimball comes in, and because of my position as police authority, I was there on the stage to assist on security. And I don’t know what it was; I think we all know what it was. My son was getting old enough, he was active, and I knew I had more responsibility than I was doing. And during the flood I actually to some missionaries. And I asked them, could you guys come out and teach? They asked me if I was a member and I said yeah. I was baptized into the church when I was a little boy so they said that they couldn’t teach me. So anyway, President Kimball showed up, and there was something there that I had never seen before. And there was something in him that made him shine. It’s hard to explain unless you could see him. And it had an effect on me.

JW: Was Sister Siepert active then?

BS: She was starting to be. She had been out a few times. By the time my son was ready to go out on his mission, we were able to go through the temple together…

JW: Were there lasting effects on the police department and the community? Were there things that changed?
BS: I think it was the best time in my law enforcement career, because we focused more on service and not so much on enforcement. And so personally because of that I think I survived longer. The normal police chief only survives about five years…working along with the people, serving and the town pulling together to help its self. That was kind of my approach. Not that we didn’t have failures ‘cause we did. And that’s how I looked at it from that point on. I’ve always said that we’ve had the best…(muffled for a moment).

JW: So the community? Did you see a change in the community, the businesses? How long did it take for them to get back together?

BS: I think in that case, because of the government assistance, some businesses profited. They lost profits so the government picked up the bill. So I think that there were a lot of business people that came out better than they would have. Some of them built buildings bigger and better than they had already. I think it was a plus after all…But it was a good experience; it was tough at the time. I think people, when things get tough, work together. We don’t have any of these stupid jealousies; quirks that make people fight amongst themselves. If everybody is hurtin’, they really pull together. And that’s what we’ve seen in a lot of good neighbors…I think it made me a better person. Getting to know my neighbors when they’re hurtin’ and all.

JW: How old were you at the time of the flood?

BS: Oh, I was about thirty-five years old.

JW: So any other feelings?

BS: I could tell you millions of stories. But the families were really strengthened and pulled together…