Abner Garr Widdison – Life during the Teton Flood

By Abner Garr Widdison

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Box 9 Folder 10

Oral Interview conducted by Ramon Widdison

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
RW: What is your full name?

GW: My full name is Abner Garr Widdison.

RW: Would you please spell it for us?


RW: How old are you?

GW: I’m sixty-one.

RW: Where were you when you first heard about the flood?

GW: We were in the Rexburg Food Center ready to check out our groceries.

RW: What were your first reactions when you heard about the flood?

GW: I had feared this because I had heard that it was filling too fast. But our first reaction was the danger that my son Ramon and his son David would be in. So we, Dareta and I checked out and we went out to Kilgore trying to find them, and came back in. We didn’t know whether we could make it back or not. Luck was with us. We were able to get back home and get the other car and a little clothing and we left. We went up to my brother’s place in Rexburg on the hill. Then we walked up to the Civil Defense Building and we could see the water coming over the valley. The water in the north fork of the Teton River was ahead of the water in the south fork. It seemed like a wishbone. The water between the two rivers just feathered together way back. I didn’t believe at the time that Hibbard would be flooded very bad, but it wasn’t long before this island was completely covered. The water just roared right on through. That evening about five-thirty, the water began to recede a little. Before dark we were able to get in the car and drive up along the edge of the hill and see the debris and some of the damage that it had caused. The cows were out in the mud, and pigs, and horses, some were dead and some we were able to put ropes on and help them get to the bank and up on higher ground. The state police wouldn’t let us try to come out to Hibbard that night. But Sunday afternoon we were able to get through and I and my brother walked out. Sunday morning Dareta and I tried to come out on 88 and then on the Hibbard and Plano road to get home but we walked. The water was up to our waist and we decided to go on back. That afternoon is when I and my brother came out and we came out on 191 and then west down to our place. I was told from one man that flew over our house that is was gone. I was sure overjoyed when I found that it was still there. But there was around three foot of water all around the house and debris and trailers and dead animals were all around the house and in the corral. My tractors were tipped upside-down, some of the buildings were washed away. The only thing we saved was the home and what was in it, and part of what was in it. The water got in the house and destroyed our storage and everything in it that it touched. It would soak up through the bedspreads or anything that was down low enough that the water could touch. It ruined the mattresses, the beds, couch and the rugs,
and everything that we had. It took about six weeks before we could open the drawers on the cupboards and clean them out. It took eleven men that my son-in-law brought from Idaho Falls and himself and then there was myself and a son all one day to get part of the debris cleaned away from the house and this was about three weeks later when the water had subsided enough so we could get a tractor in it to move it out. Rugs all had to be taken out and everything that had been wet we took out to the road and made a big fire and most all of it was burned. Cattle, there were part of them we’ve never found any trace of. The veterinarian said this wasn’t uncommon. I know that it affect[ed] us. We had to watch where we worked and stay out of this dust because it would affect us the same way. Some of the cows that I found were down next to the Carter Bridge, about three and a half miles below here. Others that we had found had got in with the other cows and were driven east about five miles. When we got out here Sunday morning we had about a hundred and fifty head of cows in the field. Part of these had come from the Wilford area. Others had come from just this side of Sugar City. These cows were left here for about a week and then they were rounded up and taken to a cutting-out corral and there they were identified and sent back to their owners. This was quite a task for the people who had lost them and the brand inspectors and all. Some people were greedy and some people let them go. They would sooner give than receive. The water stood on the farm out here in some places for over six weeks before the sub had settled enough so it could sink. This ground is nearly dormant in places. We worked it good last spring but the crop is only a third as good as it should have been. The canals were washed out in places we had holes five and six feet deep in our fields. The ditch banks were washed out on one side and on the other side it would be perfect. A few rods further down it would be washed out on the opposite side. The fence, there were three posts left on the place. One of them was by a granary that was protecting it. There was a big post that held the gate up and the gate was tied to the other post on the other end. Those were two posts and the other post was out in the corral with a couple of guide wires on it. Our trucks and all of the machinery is ruined and all our storage grain that we had in the bin. I always tried to keep feed enough for one year ahead, enough for part of a year. This was all gone. Our hay was all gone and ou[r] straw and this seed we had was all wet and was ruined. It was mildewed and had to be hauled off. Mud in our shop was nearly a foot deep. It had knocked a hole in back of the granary that we use for a shop and we can’t find part of our tools or motors that we had there.

GW: Did you have assistance from any groups that came through?

RW: Yes. First there was two ladies, and a man and his son come from the West Idaho Falls Stake came here and they helped us all one day. They helped take the drapes down and some of the things they thought they could save. They took them down to see if they could be cleaned and some of our clothes. Ramon and Garwin Bowen came and helped tear up the rugs and helped haul out some of the spoiled storage we had. About two weeks later I had about six people came and they helped us wash the walls down and started to paint. Larry and Gloria came and helped paint and Ramon. We had help come in and Dareta all this time was in the hospital and when she got out she had to go to my daughter’s place and stay there for at least three weeks. People were good to us. They helped us in every way. The clean up will take a long while to get it settled because the
sediment and silt from the flood is so deep, it cakes on top and the seeds cannot come through and the water will not soak through it like it did the other soil. So you’ve got to cultivate this ground more and work that sediment in. Our canal banks are weak and our ditches, our head gates were washed out and they had to be put in new. The breast work in the canal was washed out. Our bridges here, they stayed in. We were without electricity for a little over three weeks and without a telephone for six months and four days. We weren’t worried about the telephone because we had been without it so long that it didn’t bother us.

RW: Did the church have any assistance during this time?

GW: Yes. The ward served dinner in the recreation hall everyday. They would have a meeting after they had dinner. The bishop would call us to order and we would have a meeting there and he would tell us what he found out and what was the best way to proceed with our cleanup and how to keep track of our records and this helped in many ways. It helped buoy the people up. It wasn’t just a person for himself, but it was each person worked with his neighbor and with the ward and the Bishopric and Ricks College. They opened the doors. Everyone was welcomed. It didn’t matter what religion they belonged to, they were welcomed there. There wasn’t a charge made of any kind. We had a lot of people that came through and were trying to scavenge this and that but I don’t think anything they got was any good other than that what the people had stored up high. There was some of that that was taken. A lot of these people were caught.

RW: Have you had any trouble with the government or the agencies trying to get compensation for anything that you lost? How have they cooperated?

GW: They have cooperated. I have no complaints whatsoever, so far. I haven’t got returns on my claim, but I believe they will be fair. There’s some questions in my mind, some of my machinery was old, but I had taken good care of it and it did the work of new equipment. How are they going to judge and make an honest settlement? This is what I’m worried about. That equipment did the job of a new outfit. My understanding is they will only allow a certain percent and this will not replace it.

RW: Has any government agency been out to survey the damages and give you any idea as to what you might be able to expect?

GW: Yes. They have been out and been over the farm, they have measured the silt and they have measured the gravel and the holes that were washed in and the damage to the ditches, and the head gates and to the buildings. I don’t see how they can be repaired or replaced for the amount that they have allowed me. I think that I can just go and do the best I can. And get along because I’m happy to have left what I have.

RW: Now, you mentioned the great amount of silt that is still on the farm and the crop isn’t as good. Is the government going to make any compensation for loss of crops because of the silt?
GW: My understanding is that they will. They advised me to subsoil the ground again and deep plow again. This was all done last spring, but they advised me to do it again. In places I’ll have to haul more topsoil in and this is very expensive to haul it in and put it over where the topsoil was washed out. The scraper[s] weren’t able to get enough topsoil to cover it. The fences, they have been put back in, but my corrals, and loading shoots, and stock yards they haven’t been replaced yet and this, I don’t know how I’ll get it done.

RW: What about your cattle and things that you had, you’re not able to keep them here anymore?

GW: No. My cattle are, what I have left, are up in Teton Basin. There are only five head left out of thirty-seven. They have died and got sick and last winter they picked up botryomycosis and we had to sell those that had contacted it. We are about out of the cattle business.

RW: How do you feel with everything that has happened, do you feel that it has strengthened you testimony in the Church or anything like this?

GW: Yes. I’ve never doubted it. This flood has in a way been a great blessing to everybody. It’s made them more humble. It’s helped them to work one with another. I know if there was another disaster somewhere, that the people here would go to assist and they would put in many days and they would travel far to do it.

RW: Can you think of any miraculous experiences that you have experienced or other people experienced in going through this flood?

GW: Yes, I do know that it takes experience to make anything work. I found this out with the state police, the old troopers knew the people and knew how they would react, but the young state police who was fresh out of school, they were just going by the book. This doesn’t work. You have to have experience and knowledge to make things work. We’ve had some trouble getting back and forth from the hospital in Idaho Falls, but all we had to do was go over to the State Trooper in charge and tell him what was the matter and he would say, go on, go on through. We know you people, go on. This happened, we went to the Sheriff’s Office when they started giving us trouble. We had to come out every morning and we’d go in there every night and some of these young State Troopers weren’t going to let us through. So we went to the Sheriff’s Office and he said, “You go on through, we know you and you won’t have any trouble.” Some of these young State Troopers, they didn’t want to cooperate until they had a meeting and told them that they were to keep people from coming in that didn’t belong here. People that were here would take care of themselves. The people had to go back and forth to their homes to get them ready so they could clean them up and occupy them again.

RW: Tell them how the animals reacted.
GW: About the second day after the flood, I was riding my three-wheeler up the canal bank because that was the only high ground to get up to where the cows were. The cows had walked back and forth on the canal bank until it had settled about oh, six inches to a foot deep in the center of the canal bank where the main trail was. I had been up there once before and this was my second trip and I got about halfway up the canal bank all at once the canal bank gave way and I tipped over, upside-down in the canal. The three-wheeler with those big tires wanted to stay right on top of me in the water. Finally, I threw it downstream off from the top of me. I thought, well I'll have to get a rope and tie on to it, and pull it upstream to get it out. I reached down in the water to grab the clutch to throw it out of gear, I got hold of the starting rope. I gave a big yank on it and it started to puttin’ so I revved the motor up a little and it worked alright so I headed upstream and we went on up the canal. There was about two feet of water in the canal, we went right up the canal.

RW: Did you get on the machine again then?

GW: Yes, I got on the machine and rode it right up to where the gravel had gone in the canal and we just rode it right on out. I was soaking wet, just glad to get out. I went on up around the cows. These wheelers, they have these wide tires on, you wouldn’t sink in the mud. A horse would sink in nearly to his knees. These three-wheeler[s] could go right on top, you could go anywhere with them. We would go up and round the cows up and see what we had and what we didn’t. Wh[en] I heard that there were cows down along the Snake River to the west of home, I went down in there and we found cows, but none of mine until about a week later until the cows came off the little islands that were out in the middle of the river. These cows knew where home was. If people could have left them alone, they would have come back, but people thought they were just strays and would drive them off. If you would go and ask people if they had seen any, they were cooperative. They would tell us yes or no and where they had seen them. Everybody had lost stock or their crops and we all had to work together. As far as a crop last year, the crop was a hundred percent lost. There wasn’t even any pasture that any animals could have ate because the silt was so deep on it that the cows would go up and smell it and just shake their heads. They wouldn’t eat it. If you did turn the cows out to eat the pasture, why they would be on a run. Somebody had to be there to herd them all the time. My brother was good, he said, “Well let’s load them up as you find them, we’ll take them up to the basin and that’s where we’ll leave them for the summer.” When winter came, we didn’t have any fences down here, so we left them at his place and they are still up there now. Those three-wheeler bikes, they are good. If you don’t go pushing them too hard because they will buck you off just like a horse. You can go through mud and water and up and down steep banks and they will keep you going if you try.

RW: Did you support the building of the dam when it was being built?

GW: Yes. I still have hopes that they will rebuild it. But this time I hope they put a farmer in charge that knows something about building. You take anybody that’s irrigated or handled water, knows that you can’t put a new dam in a ditch or canal or whatever it may be and fill it up and expect it to hold. That material has to be soaked and let settled
as it is filled. When it sits and soaks and settles, it will hold the water. That dam may have had a bad design, but I honestly believe that it will be rebuilt and maybe redesigned because that dam is needed for water and power and for holding back the flood waters of the Teton River because there is a lot of snow and a lot of water in the Teton Range of mountains there and we have to have some way of controlling it.

RW: You mentioned that some of your buildings have been washed away, did you find them or anything like that?

GW: Yes, there was my coal house and we had other storage in there and it had washed about a quarter of a mile to the west and it had seven and a half to eight ton of coal in it and it had washed up over the road and over a ditch. Then my four-bottom plow, it had went nearly a quarter of a mile down through my neighbor’s field, a big heavy item I didn’t think would move. It got there some way or other. My bailer was over at my neighbor’s buildings and it wasn’t hurt. His bailer had gotten ruined. Logs had hit it and jammed the plunger and my other neighbor’s it had broke the power take off in it and big flywheel was broken on it. My brother’s bailer, it wouldn’t work. The pickup on it got ruined and I said, “Well I don’t see where mine is too bad off, if I can get the silt and all of the debris out of it.” So I worked to nearly one o’clock in the morning washing it out and the next day I worked all day long and by evening I had it so I could move the flywheel a little. My neighbor came over and we hooked his tractor on it and he was able to get it to go. We worked about an hour on it and we thought it would work so we greased it and he had a little hay and my neighbor had a little hay and my brother had some hay so I said, “So if I can get a tractor, I’ll bale your hay.” We got a tractor and put on it and I baled all their hay. By the time we got done, the oil seals bearings in the plunger in the pickup reel were rattling to beat the band. I guess that as long as the baler is going to run, because it would cost too much to have it overhauled. Part of my machinery I never found. There was a big manure spreader, and my hay loader and my truck bed, my grain bed and sides is gone. And the sides off my cattle rack were gone. My pig houses were gone and it picked a big granary up and turned it around the cow barn and one garage it just tore to pieces. My wife’s car and the van was there and my pickup, it washed up next to one of the tractor’s and one of the doors had got broken off and ruined the pickup. It just ruined all the machinery that was out in that silt. None of them have been able to run.