DF: I am Dennis Farr. Today, March 22, 1977 I am going to interview Clendon Gee. The general topic will be the Teton Dam disaster.

DF: Mr. Gee, could I get you to spell your name?

CG: Yes, Clendon Gee.

DF: Where were you born?

CG: I was born in Ashton, Idaho.

DF: When did you move to Sugar City?

CG: We moved here in 1937.

DF: Where were your parents born?

CG: My father was born in Toole, Utah and my mother was born in Lewiston, Utah.

DF: What is your occupation?

CG: I’ve been a farmer most of my life and a bookkeeper.

DF: To start with I’d like to get your feelings on how you felt when they started to build the dam and before the dam broke, and what your feelings were, as to if you thought it would hold and what the people thought.

CG: Well, we had needed the dam in this country of a long time and even as much as fifty years ago there was surveys made about a dam sight on the Teton River. There has been quite a few of them made on different places on the river, but this one began about ten years ago, and the sight was selected. We all felt good about it here in the valley. We needed the dam for flood control, for power, for irrigation, and we felt it would be quite an asset to us. So, almost everyone favored it. We had no thought that it wouldn’t hold. We’ve had experiences with dams in this country all of our lives. They’re an old thing to us, and we’ve never known of one to go out. So such a thing to us, and we’ve never known of one to go out. So such a thing didn’t occur to us. We thought it was perfectly safe, and we felt good about it.

DF: I’ve heard rumor that people went up and saw it and said it wouldn’t hold, and I was wondering if you’d heard of this?

CG: I never [had] and no one else that I know of ever had any idea that it was anything but a good dam sight and one that would be perfectly safe. There was a lot of opposition. Mostly from the environmentalists who were concerned about the few elk that wintered in the canyon and then the fishing, but I never heard any complaint about the sight being unsafe.
DF: Then you were here in Sugar City when the dam broke?

CG: Yes!

DF: Would you like to talk just a little and explain what it looked like and some of the things you saw as the water came?

CG: That morning we had been working here on the farm branding cattle. I had an appointment at the temple in Idaho Falls at one o’clock, so I left here at eleven, went home, and got ready to go to the temple. And was ready at twelve outside stepping into the car when our neighbor drove by and said the dam had broken and everybody was supposed to get out of here as quickly as possible. We talked it over as five or six men going down together, and we decided the best thing to do was to get our families and leave, and so we did. My wife took the car and I took the pickup. We put in a few things: a few blankets, some food, and a few record books and we left and drove up on the hill over in Moody and stood there and waited for the water to come. It was quite a sight. We stood up there and saw it come. When it first hit, it looked like a cloud of dust. My son Jim and I stood there and argued about it. I said it was a dust storm and Jim said, “That’s water.” Pretty soon I could see that it was water alright, but it looked like northward that it covered the whole country clear to St. Anthony. Of course it only went within a mile and a half of St. Anthony, but to us it looked like it was clear up there. It just came down there just like a cloud of dust. I think it actually raised dust ahead of it and then the water was dirty itself, see, so that it looked dusty. Then it got nearer to us and we could see it strike the farms and just below us in the river bottom was a herd of Brent Breiris’s cattle. And we saw the water hit those cattle and just pick them up and carry them. They had run over against the fence to get away from the water and couldn’t go any further—then it struck them and we just didn’t see them anymore. But, several of them survived. Then we saw quite a few trailers floating by, other buildings, houses, barns, sheds of different kinds floating by us. We really weren’t very far from the water when it got down in the area. We stayed there until it got over towards Rexburg. Then we went around the hill and over to Rexburg, up above the college on the hill. Our son was up there with his father-in-law. They were in the mechanical arts building, and we stood there on high ground, watched the water go through Rexburg and down the side of the railroad tracks and the highway. When it got way on down we decided we’d leave, and went to Driggs and stayed for a few nights.

DF: When the dam broke and your first warning came, what were your feelings? Did you believe it had broken?

CG: Yes! I believed it. We accepted the fact it had broken, but none of us had any idea it would do the damage that it did. For instance, when our boy heard it he took the horse and pulled her up on the loading chute and tied her there, thinking she’d be up above it. Well, it took the horse, chute, corals, cattle, and everything. It just carried it right away. It was far deeper than we ever imagined it could be. It had spread out, going north; I would say it’s about seven or eight miles wide in this area.
Where did you stay the first few days and who with?

CG: We went to a motel in Driggs and stayed for four nights. We ate our meals there, and the people were very good to us. The man who owns the motel is the Representative of Teton County. He gave us two nights free in the motel and some of the cafés gave us a few meals free. There were quite a few people from here that went up there finding places to stay. They were very kind to us, but we stayed there four nights, by then we had located an apartment and my sister-in-law’s home in Rexburg [was] over on the hill. She takes students in the winter and has it open in the summer. So we were able to get that, and we stayed there until the trailers were available.

DF: Would you like to explain a little what the first few days after the flood were like? What did it look like and then how did they start to clean up?

CG: This happened Saturday, and we stayed up there Sunday. Sunday two of my boys came down from the ranch. They have a cattle ranch up in the basin with a home on it. Two of the boys went up there and stayed. They came down Sunday and stopped at Teton and walked down here. Then they came back and told us what it was like. Just about everything was destroyed. There were twenty-two homes on this street between here and the river, and every one of them was destroyed. Then Monday morning we bought some equipment; wheelbarrows, shovels, an ax, and a few things we thought we might need to clean up. Then we came down. The roads were all out. We had a hard time getting in. We had to come in on the back roads from the cemetery and wait while they actually built part of the road before we could get in. We had to ford through a lot of water that was still running. We got into our house in Sugar City, and things were pretty bad. Half of the east wall of the house as gone entirely. Half of the south wall and much of the furniture were also gone. The water had covered everything on the downstairs floor. Mud was about a foot and a half deep on the floor. Generally the water had quit running except in certain places, but it was so wet and sloppy and muddy, you just couldn’t hardly get around. We didn’t really do much that day but look. Then the next day the boys and our son-in-law and daughter from Ogden had come up and we brought a scraper down from Teton basin and hooked the pickup on the scraper and scraped our garage out. We got the mud out and cleaned that out the best we could, and that’s where we stored the things that we could salvage. We’d take them out on the driveway and wash them up and put them in the garage and store them. Inspections were made on the houses quite quickly and our house was condemned. They said it couldn’t be repaired; that it wasn’t worth it. So, we didn’t try to clean all the mud out of it. We just took out things that we could salvage. But, you know the Iona Stake was assigned to our ward to help us clean up. Those people came in bus loads day after day after day, and they would meet over at the gym and we would put in our applications for help there. Then when the help arrived, they’d be sent to the homes. They’d come with shovels and whatnot, whatever was needed, and we dug out everything we could save, and we just had an enormous amount of help from those people. Then during the clean up, the Church furnished meals at the gym. It was a dinner and then these people from Iona would come up and distribute the dinner. The food was prepared over at the college and brought over here, and they’d come everyday and pass it out to the people who cleaned
up and things. They had a first aid station over there. They had a person in charge there
everyday and pass it out to the people who cleaned and things. They had a first aid
station over there. They had a person in charge there everyday who found out what the
needs of the people were and kept record of them and tried to fill them. It was called the
command post and they’re the ones who directed the people who came in to work. We
had people as far south as Salt Lake, from Boise, and they just came from all around the
country. And they just kept coming until finally we had to tell them there wasn’t
anything for them to do. Everything was cleaned up that could be, and that was left
would have to be taken out by bulldozers and trucks.

DF: As far as injuries, do you know how many people were injured or any personally
who were injured?

CG: No. There wasn’t anyone injured in any way that I knew. We actually had six
people who were killed by the flood and five who died of heart attacks. It could have
been brought on by the flood or it might have happened anyway. I don’t know. They
had heart trouble, and they died at that time. There were almost injuries of any kind. It
just killed these people; they were the only causalities of the flood. Almost no sickness
resulted either, very few cases of illness. I know of only two people in Sugar City who
were taken into the hospital and treated. They thought they might have had food
poisoning or something, but I don’t think it was. But they were home in a day or two. It
didn’t amount to much.

DF: As far as the destruction in the town itself, could I get you to explain a little of what
the main street and downtown Sugar City looked like after the first few days or weeks?
Were there any dead animals?

CG: Yes, there were dead animals around. But almost before they allowed people in
Sugar City they had cleaned up all that they could see. But there were, in fact, down in
the school house in the kitchen, one or two dead cows that washed in through the doors or
windows or somewhere. But they got that straightened out early. They were afraid of
disease, and they would have undoubtedly had some if they hadn’t been so careful about
that. We had another apartment house that had been torn down also. The hardware store
was repaired. The service station was saved, as were the City Hall and school house, but
all of them needed extensive repairs. In the town, we had approximately two hundred
and fifty homes, and less than fifty of those could be saved. Most of them are torn down
now. There are still a few standing now that will be torn down. That is about four-fifths of
them. Some houses were standing, but they just weren’t safe. The foundations were
crumbled; the walls were pushed out. They just weren’t safe. The destruction was so
extensive that when this thing is repaired, we’ll almost have a new town. As far as the
communications went, for the first little while, I’m sure the electricity and telephone lines
were out.

DF: How did the people communicate? Were any families split?
CG: Yes, at first. The first day or two they had word over here that hundreds of people were lost. One member of a family looking for another and not finding them; they were reported lost. Well, actually they were alright. It was just a matter of getting them together. For quite a while, for several days you couldn’t even call into this area, even Rexburg. They just cut off communications for people in general and left what communication they had open for people particularly working on the flood. So our family members living in different parts of the country just couldn’t get any word to us, and they couldn’t find out anything. They were quite worried, but we must have been in this situation for three weeks or more. Then finally they got a telephone in Sugar City. It was down there on Main Street. They put in a couple of pay telephone by the seminary building and they were available for anyone to use. The telephones were down, power lines, the roads were out, railroads were destroyed. I can hardly understand how that water could just pick up big section of railroad track and carry it out in the fields. A lot of it stood right on end. I don’t know how it could do it, but it did. You would be amazed; I am still, at how rapidly the power company and the railroad company got those facilities into use again. It was just a marvel how they did it so rapidly. They had several agents working to fix up the roads to make them passable where they were all washed out. It was just a wonderful thing to watch them rebuild so fast.

DF: Going along with the communications, did the CB or two-way radio used while the lines were down?

CG: To my knowledge they weren’t by people generally, only officers. They put on quite a large police force. These people had to use them. So, they really weren’t of any asset, except to police.

DF: Mentioning the police force, what are your feelings about the way they handled the situation?

CG: From my point of view over here, I’m just sure they handled it well. Before they got things set up, there were people who came immediately and starting looting, hauling off anything of value that they could see. As, so as they got organized, which was just a few days later, they had officers posted on every road into this town. You couldn’t get in and you couldn’t get out after about nine o’clock. If you were in here, than you stayed in. If you were out, you stayed out. I feel that that saved a lot of property from the people, and I know as soon as they stopped patrolling, people started stealing. There are people around that would take anything under any conditions and they did. So, I feel they really did a good job.

DF: You mentioned a little earlier the aid by the church and the Red Cross. Could I get you to go into detail on that?

CG: Well, right at first there weren’t any stores here, or in Rexburg where you could buy anything, and you couldn’t get anywhere. The roads were washed out so badly you couldn’t travel and they were stopping travel. The Red Cross came in here, and they were even active, I’d say, a day before the Church. But they just came in here and
offered all kinds of supplies: food supplies principally, and clothes, not so much clothes, but bedding and things of this kind. About the following day the Church was in. The Red Cross stayed here quite awhile after that, and they set up over in the Manwaring Center and passed out anything they had to anybody that came there and asked for it. The Church, within a day or two after the flood, was set up over there to feed the people. Dan Black, the head cook, said that for quite a while they fixed up to 20,000 meals a day. They fed the people three times a day. It was a wonderful blessing. We just ate there one meal because we were pretty well set up so that we didn’t need any. But there were a lot of people who used that as their source of food all summer. Then the Desert Industries came in with clothing and food supplies you could buy if you were set up to do your own cooking. Bedding, beds, most anything you’d want they had, and you were free to go there and get all you wanted. They kept those things open and available to people just as long as they were in need of it. At first, you didn’t even need a bishop’s order, which is the practice of the Church. The people just came and got what they wanted, but then later after things got established a little better, the people were required to get a bishop’s order to purchase these things.

DF: As far as ward meetings and church, where did you hold them?

CG: Well, for about the first month we were asked to go to any church we could attend, that was the available to use; we didn’t have anything set up. But after a month or so it was arranged for us to hold our own Church services in Teton Ward. The bishops in Sugar City area did something, maybe others as well, but for quite a long time we held meetings everyday in the gymnasium. They weren’t church meetings, but everyday the stake presidency was meeting with representatives of different government organizations that were in here to give aid. Everyday he would deliver their information to the bishops who in turn would tell us so we would know what was coming, what to plan on, and how to proceed with our work and so on. I feel like these gave us more encouragement and help than any other thing that happened. It just kept our spirits up. It didn’t leave us in the dark. We were informed everyday as to what was going on around us. It gave us a good feeling; we felt like all these organizations were really doing their best to help us, and I’m sure they were and the Church was doing the same. For quite a long time we held these meetings everyday, then as work progressed and their wasn’t such a great demand, things settled down and we held them three times a week then twice a week, until finally we discontinued holding them entirely as work got pretty well done. But it was a great service, a moral builder, to the people.

DF: Talking about the morale of the people, what was the feeling of the majority of the people?

CG: Well, I’d say that 95 percent of the people took it very well. They accepted it as something that just happened. They didn’t seem to be exceptionally downhearted or discouraged. They were generally cheerful. They didn’t blame anyone in particular except there’s a sign down here just outside of Sugar City that somebody painted. It says, “Wanted, dead or alive, one dam engineer.” It was kind of a joke, but there were a few
that had ill feelings and were putting blame here and there. I was really proud of the way the people handled this.

DF: You being a farmer, could I get you go into detail on personal loss, land, cattle, horses, equipment?

CG: As I said, we were just branding and we had about half the cattle done, and of course they were scattered over the country. I don’t know where they all went. Out of a hundred and twenty-five cows we found seventy-eight, and a few have shown up since. These were brought into the auction yards here in Rexburg. There were about seven head brought in there. We don’t know where they’d been, who had them or anything, they just brought them in there. It was this fall before they came in. Just about a week ago we got a check from Idaho Falls. One had been brought in there all crippled. Maybe there are others around somewhere, I don’t know. We’ve got two animals. We don’t know who’s they are and the brand inspectors don’t either, so we’re still holding them for somebody. When the animals were scattered, the state brand inspectors’ service took charge of the round up. We didn’t round up our own cattle at all. They had their riders go out and round them up and take them into central places; some were brought in to Ashcrafts, just out on the edge of the flood, then to Huskensons out there also. Then we would identify what we could. But for the most part, they used brands. We feel like we lost a lot of calves because we didn’t have them branded. There’s no way to claim them. I feel like they did a good job though. Now, we would have had one hundred and six calves and we lost ninety-one of them. They were quite young and just couldn’t fight that. Some of them that we saved were without mothers, so they’re still little runts and they don’t amount to much. The land, you know our land lies under a main canal right on the east boundaries or our land fields. It was a good part of the summer before they could get the banks of that canal built up and the water shut off. So, this ground right behind us here had water running on it for three weeks. The rest of it out north had water running on it nearly the whole summer before they could finally get it dried up. So when we were ready to clean up the fields there was a lot of it we could not do because it was still under water. So it went until late and it still isn’t cleaned up. As to the ground, I don’t feel like much of our ground itself was damaged. It just doesn’t appear to be, and we feel it should produce as well as it’s ever done. Because of the trash and silt in our alfalfa crops especially, we’ve had to plow it all up. We just didn’t dare harvest that hay, and take a chance of getting wire and iron and nails in it to feed the animals, so we plowed it all up after gleaning it the best we could. If there’s still more of that stuff out there we’ll probably find it as we work the ground; we’ll be able to get the rest of it out of the way. Some areas and some farms in the area were completely destroyed, but ours wasn’t. These farms around here didn’t seem to be damaged too much.

DF: Did you lose a lot of equipment?

CG: We’ve had to replace about all the equipment we had here, as I mentioned, the boys have a cattle ranch up in the basin and some of the equipment was up there. That was safe, but not nearly everything that’s here has had to be replaced. There are a few items that don’t have too many bearings on that we figure we can repair. But the machines that
have a lot of bearing on we’ll just have to have them all taken off. So, most of our equipment has had to be replaced.

DF: How did you go about replacing and rebuilding your barns, corrals, etcetera?

CG: Well, we had to file claims on everything and we had to give the dimensions of the buildings. Then we got a contractor to tell us what they would estimate it would cost to replace that building, the same with everything that was washed away. On machinery, we had to go to the equipment houses and find out what it would cost to replace, say a tractor similar to what we had, then we turned it in. We had to do that with every item we had, even small ones. We’ve got a long list of things that we turned in to the Bureau of Reclamation. They had a verifier come out and go over the things, and if they figured there needed to be adjustments made, they’d make them. Then, we would discuss adjustments and finally arrive at a satisfactory figure. Now! On the cattle we had to show reasonable proof that we had them in the first place, by someone that knew. We had to place a price on the cows, and in doing this we tried to find buyers or people who handled cattle about what it would cost to replace the kind of animal we lost. On the calves, most of the cost of raising the calves that is until fall at least, when we usually sold them, had already been put on them. There was only a few dollars of expenses in the summer, so we figure the calves at what we thought they’d be at by November or the first of December. We turned those figures in with our hay losses, and then these things were reviewed by a verifier. We did the same things with our homes and our furnishings. In general, we feel like they made a pretty fair settlement. Sometimes they’d cut us too much, and we’d go talk to them and work it out. Generally they were pretty good; I think they tried to be fair. Now everybody says they haven’t had this experience, they’ve had nothing but trouble, but this has been our case. We think they’ve done very well.

DF: What have you done for feed for your cattle this winter?

CG: It happened that we produce quite a lot of feed in Teton Basin, from the ranch, and we did produce enough for this year, but it is next year we’re worried about. The drought coming will affect that crop up there, and we don’t have any hay down here. So it’s next years, not this year we’re worried about.

DF: What are your feelings about the dam being rebuilt? And what is the feeling of the people in general?

CG: I believe I can safely say that of the people I’ve talked to, most of them would rather it wasn’t rebuilt, but I still think we have the need for it. The same need we had before, and I expect it will be rebuilt again. I believe that they have learned enough in this experience that they’ll put a dam that will hold. I feel that I would feel reasonably safe living below the dam that they’ll build, if they do rebuild it. Personally, I wish we didn’t have to have it, but since we do, I would go along with rebuilding it