Diana Godfrey – Life during the Teton Flood

By Diana Godfrey

September 7, 1977

Box 6 Folder 26

Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

Transcript copied by Kip Nichols January 2006

Brigham Young University – Idaho
CS: Diana, would you spell your name, please?


CS: Thank you. Diana, how old are you?

DG: I’m 41.

CS: Where were you born?

DG: I was born in Magrath, Alberta, Canada.

CS: How long have you lived in the Rexburg area?

DG: About 12 years.

CS: What was your address at the time of the flood?

DG: 340 Orchard, and it’s the same today.

CS: Did you own your own home there?

DG: Yes.

CS: Do you have a family?

DG: At the time of the flood I had seven children and a husband and I was expecting my eighth child.

CS: And all of them were at home?

DG: All of them at home.

CS: Now, do you work for a living?

DG: No, I don’t.

CS: Prior to the construction of the dam had you been involved in the discussion of it at all? Were you opposed to it or in favor of it, or indifferent?

DG: Indifferent, I’d say.

CS: Where were you that morning and what were you doing when you first heard that the dam had broken, and do you recall your initial reaction to that news?
DG: I was at home talking on the telephone to a friend, wondering why her husband and my husband weren’t home because I could hear sirens screeching around town and we lived a half a block of the main highway and I thought that maybe there’d been an accident and, of course, I was a little nervous. That’s why I had called her. My children came in and said, “The Teton Dam’s broken!” I don’t remember being really too concerned at first but concerned for a friend who lived near the river. I tried making a call to let her know that maybe she should be aware, and got another friend on the phone because I dialed wrong. I must have been more nervous than I thought. That friend asked me what she should do. Her husband wasn’t home. I told her I thought maybe she should put her precious things on the second floor ‘cause she had a two story home and I didn’t know what else she could do. Then I got off the telephone and a lady called me telling me that my husband had, or a man at least, had told her to call this number in Rexburg – she lives out by Heise – to tell whoever answered the phone, “Take the children to high ground, that the dam had broken.” And then I think I started getting a little bit nervous.

CS: Now, did you make any preparations prior to leaving the home as far as doing anything in the house?

DG: I didn’t do anything at first. When that lady called and said I was to get to high ground, I nervously picked up some diapers and the little two-year-old’s blanket and grabbed some bread out of the bread drawer, fresh baked bread that I’d just made, and grabbed some cans of tuna fish and threw the kids in the truck, panel truck, and started [it] up to take ‘em up to the top of the hill.

Of course, my first thoughts, like everybody and even when I hear a siren I always think, I mentally think in my mind, “Where are my children?” And at the time I thought, you know, the one I couldn’t account for then was my, at the time I guess he was 17 year-old son, who had gone fishing with his church group. So I stopped and talked to our bishop and asked him if he knew where it was that they had gone and he said no, but he thought he was on the other side and he thought he was all right. He was shoveling gravel and putting it in sandbags to sandbag his home. And so I thought that that was a good idea so we dropped the younger children and the 13 year-old with them up at the hill, came back down, used the sand out of the kids’ sandpile and had the older girls help me and we were gonna sandbag the window like he had done. I didn’t get to far because my husband came home at that time and took me back up again.

CS: Now, were you up there for the remainder of the afternoon?

DG: Yes, except that one little incident where I remembered that I was in charge of the neighbor girl who’d gone home to fix dinner for her family who were out fishing on Henry’s Lake and I got a neighbor to take me back down again and to check on this girl. Then he went off and left me ‘cause I’d gone over to see how my family was doing, wondering what they were doing over there. And so my
husband had to take me back up again. And then the rest of the time until 9:00 that evening I was up on the hill.

CS: Now, from where you were up there, were you able to see the floodwaters come in, and what did they look like to you?

DG: Like a big dust storm at first especially. And then of course, you knew it was water. But it was, you know, very muddy, dirty looking, just more like dirt rather than water. And you could, I could see it up, I couldn’t see our home but I could tell that it hit our place when I could see it, oh, about a half a block away on a neighbor’s, it was up on their top porch, you know, so I knew that it was in our home, too.

CS: How did you feel as you watched the waters come into town?

DG: I don’t know that, I didn’t, I don’t know. Must have been a shock. From where I was I didn’t see anybody cry or act real real upset. Maybe underneath they were. But I didn’t see them. I didn’t feel so myself. At first I was a little upset and then when I’d gone down to pick up that little girl my husband told me that the worst thing that could happen was for me to get upset. I calmed down and I don’t remember getting really upset except maybe later on, a few days later when I was tired at night. Other than that I didn’t see one of my children cry, any of us showed very much emotion as far as except with get this cleaned up. Other than that, that’s it.

CS: How about the people, the other people that were up there watching with you, how did they seem to be?

DG: We were kind of high up. I’ll tell that one little incident about the lady I knew who, two ladies I knew. We had field glasses and we were sharing our field glasses with those that were there. And the one lady said to the other lady, she had our field glasses and she said to the other lady, “There goes your home. Would you like to look?” And she said, “No.” And I’ve thought about it afterwards. At the time I didn’t think a lot about it, but after I’ve thought, you know, what a funny reaction if your home’s leaving, you know, to have that reaction – no, you didn’t want to see it go. And she didn’t cry, she didn’t act, she was quiet, but I don’t remember her acting too upset. I don’t remember anybody acting really upset. But then we were around a lot of people from Arizona that had come to spend the summer who had apartments in town. And we shared our glasses with them. I think they were kind of shocked at how many people had so many kids around them. I remember one of my kids saying to the man, “Well, you can stick around and help us clean up.” And he said, “No way!” I remember him saying that to the kids. And I think that my children were a little shocked to tell you the truth. But he was an older man, of course, you know, it’s fine. I just thought it was kind of interesting.
Another thing I remember, though, is that my son was missing and another friend of mine was there and her son was missing. I remember having a lonely feeling because my husband wasn’t there and I remember her son coming; her son wasn’t even near the flood, but you’re always concerned anyway, no matter where they are and you don’t know. But I remember her son returning and coming up there and her hugging him and thinking, “Oh!” I mean I felt so alone because I didn’t have my boy. I remember that feeling. It didn’t seem like the people that I knew seemed really close. I mean, I don’t know what I was wishing for but I do remember that now that I think of it, feeling kind of alone feeling ‘cause my husband wasn’t there and I had the little children and my boy wasn’t there and I didn’t know for sure what Ririe was doing down there.

CS: When were you first able to go back to your home, how were things when you got there, and how did you react to that?

DG: Probably the same way. I wasn’t as concerned, I’m sure, as my husband because he has to provide it all and he had worked hard for everything we had. I just remember that that’s the way it is so that’s the way it’ll be, you know. When I went down, I went down at 9:00 Saturday night to see it and he stayed down pretty much the whole night except he’d keep coming up to check on us and also we’d go over and check to see if our son had turned up at the Manwaring Center where they were having people sign in. I don’t remember being terribly shocked or anything. I just remember it was muddy and I remember getting out and having to step in the mud, you know, to get into the house so that I could look down in the basement to see what it looked like and stuff bobbing around. I remember later as we brought the family home being frightened that my two year old would fall into that water and drown. That bothered me a lot. My reactions probably are more for the safety of my children and I guess I didn’t really care about the house.

CS: Now, how far did the water actually get up in your home?

DG: It came within an inch of the ceiling of the basement and the basement was not all finished but pretty much finished. We had a lot of our family sleeping there and it really crowded us to put us upstairs. But that’s what we did. We came home, stayed home and later as we got the trailer back down and had time to get that back down we put the boys out there for the rest of the summer to sleep so that we’d have a little more room to move around because my husband had brought up so much things out of the basement there was nowhere to put things. That was an interesting thing that I’m sure everyone went through is there’s no place to put it when you did clean it. Where could you put things? We tried to save our carpet by ripping it out and we lived next to the church parking lot. We cleaned that off as best we could and then tried to squeegee out that carpet and it took us hours which was worthless. But we did that so we cleaned that parking off so we’d have a place to put stuff. But after a while they started bringing heavy equipment and machinery and storing the things that they were using around town in there,
so that wasn’t available to us. But a neighbor of ours used her roof to wash her things off. She stood up on her roof so a 60 year old woman was up there washing her blankets and stuff, you know, because she says, “This is the only clean place there is.”

CS: Now, was your yard in pretty bad shape?

DG: Oh, lots of things around, deep-freeze, refrigerator, hip waders, picnic benches, tables. We had a lot of stuff seemed to trap in our yard, we live down a little dead end road and I think maybe a lot of it trapped down in our yard.

CS: Now what, if any, aid did you receive during those next few weeks from the various organizations such as the Red Cross and the LDS Church and, of course, the government? And what did you think of the kinds of services that they provided?

DG: Well, we didn’t come up and use the facilities for eating up on campus. The Red Cross brought us some sandwiches on Monday and we got diapers and a few things like that. But I think what was the nicest thing of all is to know that it was there available if we needed it. We had some change on us. My daughter had cashed a check I think or something, had $40.00. We did a lot of shopping in Rigby and pretty much tried to fix our own meals and be as self sufficient as we could. We did a lot of our, in fact, we did all of our own laundering at the laundromat in Rigby. We even started that Sunday. We did get a lot of help from the people that came, the volunteers. We don’t live near our family. We have a lot of family in Canada and then in other places and some in Utah, California. They were really helpful in trying to, they were really aware of us and sent us money and, you know, they were extra good, you know, to us in that way, but they didn’t come here because we told them it was not necessary.

CS: Was it a conscious decision on your part to use as little of that aid as possible?

DG: I think so. I think we wanted to be as independent as we could. I think that’s sort of our nature and probably more than most people. But it was hard, it was harder for us to take aid, I think, that it would have been for maybe just the ordinary people. I don’t know why but we tend to be a little more independent. People have said that we were. I don’t mean at the flood time but I meant before, you know. I don’t know, it’s harder for us to take aid, I’m sure, that the majority. But we found that the more you took, the easier it was to take, and that frustrated us some too because I don’t like that feeling. But it was nice to know that, you know, they were there to help you, that if you needed it, it was there. I mean it wasn’t like we had to go hungry. We had money in our pocket. We could go down to Rigby and we were lucky to have some money, some change, and we could use the laundromat. We washed all our clothes down in that place and they were no nice down there even.
Everywhere you went people were nice. But it was interesting that just to go to Idaho Falls or even to Rigby it seemed like a different world, you know. Even though they were nice to you, it just seemed like a different place. I mean it seemed further away than fifteen miles, you know.

One interesting thing that happened to us is the mail service came through and I think it was Monday. My husband had ordered chicks, some baby chicks, and they came to our home either Monday or Tuesday morning, I’m not sure which, and they delivered us these baby chicks. Of course, we had no place to put them, but it was kind of interesting that the mail came through that day with the baby chicks. Couldn’t hear from anybody else or get anything else, any other word through, but we got the chicks through.

CS: Now, in the filing of your claim with the government, were you and your husband satisfied with the settlement that you received?

DG: Really satisfied. I think they really tried to be fair. I think, though, that that was one of the hardest, another, and the other hardest thing to do was to be fair with the government. I worried a good deal about, you know, being fair. I didn’t want to take more than I should and I’m sure everybody had that same feeling. It was really rough to try to decide how much you should charge and how much you shouldn’t charge and what do you charge for a stamp collection? What do you charge for two stamp collections?

CS: Now, there’s been some talk of people filing fraudulent claims with the government. Without naming any names, of course, are you aware of any cases of this happening?

DG: No, I don’t know of any cases. I really don’t know anybody’s personal things. I’ve talked, you know, of course you talk about it and everything. And I think from what talking about it I would say that people really tried to be fair. I think once in a while there was an odd comment or two that made me think that people were valuing there things maybe a little bit high. But that was my thought. I don’t know that. I couldn’t judge them. All I know is that it was a difficult decision to make no matter who made it about how much you charge for what and why.

CS: As mother of seven, eight children now, did you notice any impact on your children that you would attribute to the flood experience and anything that perhaps lingered, maybe things that you’ve noticed just immediately after or else during this whole last year that you think you would attribute to that? Which ones were the most affected by it, the little ones or the older ones?

DG: I think the six year old was the most affected. She’s a little girl and I know one instance that I didn’t realize. All their toys were, of course, in the basement and we have three bedrooms upstairs but use those just for sleeping. It’s not a play area. And so then she didn’t have anything. I didn’t really think, I mean Rigby
was that far away. We went down and got the things we needed so we didn’t think about what she needed or that she felt a loss or anything. But I remember one time of taking her, about four times we took her up to this place where they helped tend the children so that you could work. And we took her up there with our little two year old one day and when I went to get her she picked up a box of crayons. In fact, think she picked ‘em up and saved ‘em for quite a few minutes before I came. She was gonna take these crayons home. And even at the time I didn’t really, I thought, “Now, Robbie Ann, how can you do that, take these crayons?” But I didn’t think, “This little child needs a toy, she needs a possession. Why didn’t I pick some up in Rigby when I was at the grocery store?” I didn’t think of that until later. So I’m sure that it had more of an impact on her than I was even thinking. Even though we were warned and told to be concerned about the children, we didn’t think like they did, you know. They don’t know that in a week you can have the crayons back, but we think that in a week, oh, there’s no problem. I didn’t think of that until later.

Then the teenagers I think were really good and they worked and helped so good. But I think they missed not being in contact with their friends. A lot of kids that homes were in worse condition than ours that lived in the dorms and things had contact with their friends or at least if not their friends, somebody else that could be a friend or that they knew. But my children all they did was work all day and all night and they never saw anybody. You didn’t go to the neighbors’, I mean you didn’t go anywhere, you didn’t know where people were. And I think that that’s the thing they missed the most, was contact with some kind of friend.

Then, the thing that we all missed and wanted so bad was to be a routine, to get back to a routine. And you couldn’t get it. I mean it came really gradually and for a long period of time I remember thinking “Oh, if it could just be normal.” And it couldn’t be, you know. And I think they missed that too. But I don’t remember of too many other things taking it hard.

I remember my boy coming home. He worked in Rexcraft and he went back a few days later and worked for them. I remember him coming home and telling us, you know, how they were paying him more money but he’d lots rather get less pay and not have to do all that dirty work. They got a little discouraged but they all, they kept at it and they were really a good help.

A lot of people had relatives that lived in Idaho Falls or someplace else that they could get away and because my family and our family live so far away, and I was expecting a baby, it was rather difficult that year for us to get away and so we were pretty much there day in and day out and I think maybe they’d miss it more. It wouldn’t been quite so hard had we, you know, if we’d had somebody to run down to and visit and get away from it for an hour or two in Idaho Falls. Of course, you didn’t do that sort of thing. Another interesting thing that we did have, we did get away for five days. Two weeks after the flood my husband was to teach a class in Yellowstone Park and we left for five days. And we thought this would be the very best thing that ever happened to us. And my husband said, “Now when you come back it’ll be so nice you just won’t believe how different it will be. First of all we got there and we couldn’t, we dreamed all night. All we
could dream of was the flood. We’d all had nightmares, you know, thinking that we could get away but we couldn’t. And then when we came back we came down into Ashton and there was a windstorm and I tell you, it was blowing dirt all over and it was very depressing to come back. The pile of garbage that we’d left in front of the house was still there and bigger because our neighbors had chucked some more on it. And it was depressing.

But one thing that was nice and that was the park. Some volunteers had come in and cleaned that park up and that was the only thing that we could see changed. And that was so nice and I heard that these people that came in didn’t really want to clean that park because they wanted to help the people. But if they knew how special that was, you know, to go, to come home and see the park, well we only live a block and a half from the park so it’s like part of home, you know. To see that park clean, you know, that was the nicest thing that ever happened, I think, was to see that clean ‘cause the dirt was blowing all over. And you know how windy Rexburg can be anyway and the dirt all over and it was, it was so dirty that day. But that park was really nice to us.

CS: Now, Diana, as you’ve watched the town rebuild over the last year and the whole recovery process, what sort of positive things do you see coming out of this whole flood experience for Rexburg as a community? And what, if any, negative things do you think have been happening to the town because of it?

DG: I always thought Rexburg was a clean nice little town, but certainly cleaner, you know. So I think that people have been a lot more creative in their homes if that means anything to anybody. But I thought, I think it’s interesting to see the homes go up and see how they’ve become a lot more individual type homes and, you know, than all the same type. At the time that we were filling out our claim I remember being depressed about it not being fair that people had to make these decisions and that and even though I don’t know of people personally that cheated the government, I felt like it kind of wasn’t fair because I think a lot of people that are basically honest, it might’ve made them dishonest. That concerned me some. But I don’t know that it’s true. I don’t know that. I just was concerned at the time I was having to decide and thinking how easy it would be to write down something. It seemed like an awful hard job and I worried about all the people in Rexburg having to do that all the time because it would be so easy to cheat the government. It would have been very easy. And it didn’t seem hardly fair that we had to do that. I’d lots rather clean up the dirt and that than make those kinds of decisions. I don’t know other than that. You see, the town’s growing. It’s not gonna be the same to me. More people have moved in and I don’t think that’s necessarily bad. But I felt like we had a lot of people come in that weren’t all that best kind of people, too. In our neighborhood I think it changed it a little. I think it changed church boundaries a little. But whether it’s good or bad that’s kind of hard to say. Some ways it is quite good I suppose.

CS: Now, there’s been talk about the cause of the dam breaking. Of course, most people believe that it was a man-made disaster although a few people have
expressed the idea that perhaps it was an act of divine retribution. Now how do you feel about that kind of an idea?

DG: Oh, I’ve heard that comment. I just think that things go along and I mean I think that broke and I don’t particularly have any strong feelings that the Lord wanted that broke. Is that what you mean? I don’t necessarily think that’s true. I just think it broke. It’s not that I don’t believe in God or anything. I believe that. But I believe that things just happen and then it’s how we take it that’s important, not that we all have to be, that anybody makes these things, plans this all for us. We just, it’s part of life and how we react is the important thing, not that it’s made to happen.

CS: Now, as you’ve looked over this last year and all the experiences that you’ve gone through in the aftermath of the flood, in what ways, if any, have your values, attitudes, beliefs, perhaps even your personality been changed by the flood experience of what changes would you attribute directly to the flood experience?

DG: Well, I know there’s been a lot of changes, really a lot. Things aren’t as important to me. I really don’t think that that’s necessarily true in the community as a whole at all. But maybe it is. But things aren’t as important to me as they were. When I think that in a way I was that way before because I really don’t remember of being that concerned about the house. I was concerned about the children but I wasn’t concerned about the house.

CS: You mean material things?

DG: Yes, material things. I don’t remember of being really overly concerned about that. I’ve never had, you know, lots of material things. I mean I’ve had all I need and all I want, but I haven’t had lots. My husband says that he’ll be able to face a disaster easier again, but I don’t think for myself that’s true because I was able to face up and I had my baby six weeks after the flood and things weren’t in the best shape even then. But I don’t think I could face it again as easy as I did that last time because I already, I know that things could happen. I mean I know what it could be like. I think it could. I can imagine that it could be worse. And so I would become more nervous and more upset probably if I had to do something like that again. Maybe I wouldn’t; I don’t know. It’s hard to say. I don’t really know how I, how we’ve changed, but I know we’ve changed. I’d have to think about that for a while. I don't know.

CS: Well, Diana, I don’t have any more specific questions. Do you have any other thoughts or feelings that you’d like to express at this time about what we’ve been talking about?

DG: Oh, not really. I don’t think that the flood was as hard on people. I think that if it was hard on people that it’s because they... No, I shouldn’t say that either. If you just take things as they come, you know, I mean if that’s the way it is, that’s
the way it’s got to be and you might just as well face it that way. And I think that when things are hard on people a lot of times it’s ‘cause they want them to be hard on them. I really do. But I know that there’s some things you can’t control, too. And probably if was easier for me because I had eight children I had to take care of so I didn’t have time to worry about all these little frivolous things that someone else who didn’t maybe have any children at home, had all theirs gone. They had nothing to do but to worry about those things. So I realize those kind of things could get to other people. But I didn’t have time. I remember only being concerned that the house, it was so dirty, and being concerned only that, you know, that it would be clean enough to bring my baby home and I remember being concerned about that.

CS: Thank you, Mrs. Godfrey.