The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Don Ellis – Life during the Teton Flood

By Don Ellis

August 19, 1977

Box 6 Folder 5

Oral Interview conducted by Alyn B. Andrus

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
AA: Mr. Ellis, would you please spell your name for me?

DE: Don Ellis.

AA: What is your birth date and where were you born?

DE: I was born in Rexburg, June 9, 1926.

AA: Do you have a family?

DE: Yes, a wife, a son and a daughter.

AA: You own a radio station here in Rexburg?

DE: Yes.

AA: Does your family work for you?

DE: My boy does now.

AA: Where was your station located at the time the flood occurred?

DE: Our studios were on College Avenue, 54 College Avenue. The transmitter site where our transmitter was located is north of town about a mile, where the radio tower is.

AA: So your studio was right in town?

DE: Yes, our studios were right in town. We were operating our equipment remotely through telephone lines from the studio downtown to the transmitter site north of town. Actually in two locations.

AA: Where is your studio located?

DE: We have relocated here near the radio tower, right at the foot of the radio tower. Everything is located here now. We purchased a mobile home, rebuilt it and remolded it. Everything is located right here and frankly we are out of room already. We need more space.

AA: What about your home, was it flooded out?

DE: No, we are up high. Our home is up on the hill more or less, so we didn’t get any water up there. We live in the Powell Division behind the hospital so we were okay.

AA: How long have you lived in this area then? You say you were born in Rexburg, so you have lived here all your life?
DE: Yes, that’s right.

AA: I guess you owned the radio station before the flood. That is, you weren’t working for someone, it was yours?

DE: Yes, that’s right.

AA: Would you please explain your feelings about the construction of the dam? Did you oppose it or support it or did you have any feelings one way or the other?

DE: I supported the construction of it when they first began to talk about it, 15 or 20 years ago? I always supported the dam. Most of us think there was a need for the dam. I still think there is for that matter. I never opposed it.

AA: Did you have any premonition of the Teton Disaster?

DE: None at all.

AA: Did you ever look at that dam and wonder if it would hold?

DE: Never.

AA: I noticed in the office out here before we began the interview, a plaque from Governor Andrus recognizing your work that day in warning the people of the area that the floodwaters were coming. That’s quite a distinction. Would you mind telling your story of that June 5th day, 1976, when the dam broke?

DE: The sheriff’s office called us about eight or nine minutes after 11:00 that Saturday morning. The reason I know the time was we have to follow the time very closely in this business. We have various programs at various times of the day. I can always tell what time of day it is by listening to a particular program. There was a particular program on that time between 11:05 and 11:10 that span there, in which the sheriff’s office called. My son, Mitch, was announcing and working the board shift that morning. They told him that the Bureau of Reclamation had called the sheriff’s office and said there was a leak in the dam and that the people downstream from the dam should prepare to evacuate if necessary. They should be alerted to the fact that there appeared to be a leak in the dam. My son, Mitch, said “Dad, maybe you ought to look into this?” Every once in a while in the past several months somebody would say, “I heard there is a leak in the dam.” No one paid much attention to it. I never did. The fact that the sheriff’s office did call and said that the Bureau had relayed that to them, I thought, “Well, maybe I’d better go up and see what was going on.”

I got in the car. We have a two-way radio in our car. I stopped home to pick up my daughter. I thought, “I’ll take Lisa along for the ride.” My wife was in Butte, Montana, visiting her mother. We drove up to the dam site.

As I say, we have a two-way radio in the studio and my car. I was talking to Mitch while I was going up. I mentioned to him that even if there was something to this,
it might be a good idea for him to prepare a tape recorder to tape our air work. That’s what we did that day. I don’t know, you asked me a minute ago about a premonition, but I still hadn’t had a premonition. It was just a fact that it was something that ordinarily we quite often do if there is something that we think may have some importance later. Whether it is a parade or what it is, we tape it just to make sure and listen back to see how we are doing. I told him that he ought to be prepared and tape it in case something did develop. In the meantime, while we were driving up to the dam, he began to announce on the air, many times, the statement we had that the sheriff’s office had called and the Bureau said there’s a leak in the dam. The people directly below the dam along the river should probably make preparations to evacuate if necessary. He announced that several times while we were driving up to the dam site, my daughter and I.

We drove up about 11:30. Again, I was listening to the radio and there was a particular program on. It comes on between 11:25 and 11:30 and it was just ending when we drove in. We drove down to the visitors’ outlook. As soon as I drove to the visitors’ outlook, we could see the dam. I knew immediately there were problems because it was beginning to develop a pretty good sized hole right at the base of the dam. My daughter, Lisa, and I were flabbergasted. I said, “My word, Lisa! Look!” She said, “Oh dear!” She was alarmed a little bit. I told Mitch on the shortwave radio, “Hey, it looks like we are going to have a problem. You better start the tape machine.” He started the tape recorder back in the studio and then we taped everything from that point on. Our air work was on until the early afternoon when the floodwaters started to hit.

We both ran out to the visitors’ outlook and looked down at the dam. As we looked, two large machines, bulldozers, fell in that hole that they talked about. The hole began to enlarge as you watched. It enlarged and enlarged and muddy water looked like dust coming out of the hole. It wasn’t a very big gap at that time, but as we began to watch, it began to get larger. We suddenly realized that here was something quite serious so we ran back to the car and we parked in the parking lot. I talked to Mitch and said, “You better put me on the air right quick, because we have a real problem!”

We broke in and with our two-way radio. We could actually broadcast from my car. He put the broadcasting on the air. From that point on, I began telling people that we were having a difficult problem with the dam. There was definitely more than a leak. “The dam is slowly beginning to crumble, it would appear! There is a lot of water coming through and there is going to be some problems downstream!”

As I was talking, suddenly the whole downstream face of that north side of the dam seemed to crumble. A huge gaping hole broke up and water, mud and dust just spurted out. Everyone has seen photographs of these happening. The volume was suddenly so tremendous and immediately I knew, everyone standing there knew, a real disaster was in the making. I began broadcasting that continually from that point on. “People downstream, evacuate quickly! Hurry! Hurry!”

On my tape, when I listened back to it, it was simply repetitious of “People downstream, people in the way of these floodwaters, there is going to be a tremendous flood! The volume of water coming through will be tremendous! The people downstream should evacuate quickly! The water is coming!” Repetitious, on and on and on, through the entire tape. I would talk for a short time from up there, with the two-way radio and Mitch, at the studio, would take it back down there. It was the same thing.
As soon as the people began to get this information from us, or from whomever the studio was downtown where Mitch was, it was almost an instant madhouse. Mitch was by himself. State police, law enforcement sheriff officers, and people started to run into the radio station. Civil Defense people, average citizens, would run in and wonder what was going on. The state police and others began running in with messages, things for him to say, to put out. The area should evacuate. This area should evacuate. This type of thing. In the meantime, the phone was ringing continually. We also had to alert the wire service and Mitch called UPI in Boise. He told them that the Teton Dam was crumbling and there is a big flood of water coming down the Snake River Valley. It was out on the wire service too. From that point on, for the entire period while we were up there, this is all we did. We would broadcast repeatedly. As I listen back to my tape on that broadcast, it was just a continual repeat of, “Downstream people, people in the way! Downstream people! Get out! Get out! Get out!”

At one point, Mitch broke in and said, “I have just been informed that all refugees go to the college campus.” Then Mitch said, apparently he had a telephone call, “Yes, the people in the Plano area, the people in the Egin Bench area, evacuate because we aren’t sure how widespread the water is going to be!” Apparently, he had a call from out there, “Should we get out of the way?” For hours that’s all we did. I was up there and he was here, back and forth, simply passing along messages or urgent messages. As I say, the police kept coming into the studio informing him to inform people, “The flood water will reach Sugar City in 20 minutes! People get out of the way! Cannot save everything! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!” This was continued for hours until we finally went off the air.

When I was up to the dam, I had a lot of requests up there also. The state police came to me a couple of times, in fact, one time they came and wanted me to relay down to call the airport and try to get a helicopter and airplanes going as quick as we could. He wanted them to fly up the river and warn people who were in the way. Until we finally went off the air about 2:30 or 2:40, when we finally lost power, that’s about all we did. That’s all we could do.

By 2:00 the reservoir was emptying. It was quite a sight to watch the water coming through there. Fantastic! As a matter of fact, I don’t particularly care to go back up to the dam. I have been up there a couple of times since the flood, but that’s all. I would go up again if I didn’t feel a spooky feeling. It’s a kind of weird, eerie feeling. I get similar feelings when I go up to the Quake Lakes. Whenever I go up there, I get a kind of strange, same similar feeling up at that dam. Don’t ask why what it is.

We lost power at the transmitter at 2:40 in the afternoon, but there was still power at downtown Rexburg. Out here north of town, I don’t know whether the water hit the transmitter and knocked it out, or whether the power company had cut the power. When we lost power at the transmitter, we were out of business. I had asked several times by the shortwave radio, “Mitch, I’m becoming a little concerned about our radio tower. I wonder if there is some people living out around there that might like to throw a sandbag or two around our radio tower.” I was afraid that the dirt would wash away from the base of the tower and it would topple. Without out tower, we were dead. As it turned out, the tower was the only thing we had left. That was the only thing that managed to stay, but everything else was wiped clean, the transmitter and the building. We had the transmitter out by the tower north of town, everything was washed level with the ground. All that was left was a cement slab. The water hit downtown area, and came through the studio
about four and a half feet deep and just gutted it completely clean. Consequently, by that evening, all that was left of that radio station was the radio tower which was no use at all.

AA: Let me ask you some questions about your experiences at the dam. You mentioned some bulldozers working on the downstream face of the dam and you saw those bulldozers fall off into a hole which was developing on the face of the dam?

DE: I walked out to the visitor center and there were several people standing around us in that little visitors’ outlook. Everyone was with their mouth agape. “Look what’s going on!” As I walked up, one man turned to me and said, “Two bulldozers just fell into there!” They probably had done a minute or two before I had walked up. I didn’t actually see them tumble in. As I walked up he said, “A couple of bulldozers fell in.”

AA: Did you see any men on the face of the dam at that time or on the crest of the dam?

DE: No, I didn’t. Two men who were driving the bulldozers had escaped. You’ve seen the pictures and heard the stories many times how they managed to jump from the machines and get away. Actually, I didn’t look for anyone. My immediate concern, at that time, was to get back to the radio and start the word. Get the warning going to get everything else out of the way.

AA: Were there many people there viewing the collapse of the dam?

DE: There was not a large crowd, but if you include people working for the Bureau of Reclamation and other people who are employed up there, there would have been. Mostly average sightseers who happened to be there at the time. There weren’t a great many. No more than a couple of dozen at the most. As soon as things began to develop, there were a lot of people from the Bureau of Reclamation and other workers up there. There were a lot of workers running around.

The car that I was in had parked in the parking lot. I was looking across to the other side. This would be the north side of the canyon as the water was really beginning to come through. It was just roaring down that canyon. The canyon wall began to crumble a little bit. It was on the north side, simply from the water washing against it. I thought to myself, I’d better broadcast it on the air. I said, “Now the canyon wall itself is beginning to crumble!” Then it came to my mind that if it’s beginning to crumble on that side, I wonder if it’s crumbling on this side, which would be the south side. You cannot see at this particular point down deep. Since my daughter was there, she was at the view point watching. About that time, Robbie Robinson, the Chief Engineer, walked right by me and stood in front of the car. He stood with his hands on his hips looking out. I can’t explain the look on his face. He was horrified. I got out of the car and said, “Robbie!” I tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Robbie, I wonder if it’s a good idea for those people to be standing out there on that view point especially since that other wall is beginning to crumble a little bit. Let’s not compound this problem by something else.” I remember him saying, “It’s not a bad idea.” I left him and went back to my car and talked to a couple of Bureau people and a couple of their workers. In a minute or two they did get out and get people back of the viewing area. Then they asked us all to move
out of the visitors’ area, back a couple hundred yards up to where the Bureau offices were, completely away from the canyon wall.

AA: Back there where the Bureau offices are located, could you see enough and hear enough to broadcast what was going on?

DE: Yes, you bet! We could see enough from there. Adequate I’ll tell you! We could still see where the power house had been in that particular area. By that time, the water was over it and completely washing it away. A funny thing, you always remember the little things that happen. When they told us to move back out of the visitors’ area, move our cars back, I had been sitting there for so long and I had forgotten to keep my automobile running. Usually my radio will run my battery down and I couldn’t start my car. Somebody parked at the side of me and gave me a jump with jumper cables. We got my car started. Finally, I moved the car back up on the hill, back 200 or 300 yards up there. I left my automobile running and then it began to overheat. We had to scrounge around to find some water to put in the radiator. I began to run out of gas. I had problems with that car.

AA: What was your first thought when you saw the dam beginning to collapse?

DE: I recall thinking that a terrible thing has happened. As a matter of fact, I broadcasted that many times, “A terrible, horrible thing has happened! The dam has collapsed and we are going to be flooded!” I was a little frightened. One thing that came to mind, I wondered if and how many people had already been killed. As you watched the water going down the canyon, you wondered if there had been loss of life. I guess in my subconscious I realized there would have to be some loss of life because of this. That came to mind. Apparently there was already two or three by that time. The major thing was a terrible thing had happened. Something that we would never forget.

AA: You saw your job to warn people that the flood was coming?

DE: Yes, basically that has always been my business. I don’t care whether it’s me or anybody in this business; it is to keep the people well informed.

AA: Were there any other radio broadcasters up there?

DE: I didn’t see any, but later I talked to Ted Austin, KIGO, in St. Anthony. Ted Sr. was there with one of the sheriff’s deputies from Fremont County. I think he told me he drove up there with him and was there. There was a lot of confusion. They began to move around a lot of heavy equipment, for what purpose, I don’t know. There was nothing in the world they could do. As the minutes and hours progressed, more people accumulated at that point and there was a lot of state police. Then curiosity seekers, onlookers, who wanted to come see. They were not in the flood plane, but some of them drove down to see what was going on. There were more people later as they progressed then there were at the start.
AA: What did it sound like when the water began gushing through the dam?

DE: Very noisy, a big roar. It was a tremendous roar and that was it.

AA: Do you recall how it affected your daughter, Lisa?

DE: She was flabbergasted, much the same as I was. I remember as we drove up, I looked and saw that there was a problem and I turned to Lisa and said, “My word, Lisa, look! It looks like we are going to lose the dam!” The first thing she said was, “Why didn’t we bring our camera?” She was appalled as much as I was. She’s 19 now. She thought it was fantastic. I’m not so sure that she was aware, as I was, that it was a tragedy. So much of it was a lot of excitement. I think she knew that there was a big problem and there was going to be a big problem. We didn’t know how it was going to affect us. Nobody really knew at that time how it was going to affect anybody, but I think both of us felt that it was the most tragic thing that we will probably ever go through in our entire lives.

AA: You mentioned, as you looked at the water rushing down the canyon, you thought that perhaps people who had been in the canyon or in the mouth of the canyon were already killed by the floodwaters. Did you have any idea how devastating that flood might be after it reached the valley? Did you anticipate that it would flood out Sugar City and Rexburg?

DE: I must have done subconsciously because on my tape, we kept the broadcast tape, many times in the broadcast tape, I repeated on the air that the water will be rising in Sugar City, “It’s going to be rising in the town of Rexburg, there will be waters in the town of Rexburg and in the town of Sugar City. It’s a tremendous volume of water and a terrible thing. There is going to be water everywhere, not only in Rexburg and Sugar City, but points west!” I remember saying that on the tape. I had it on my tape. I must have subconsciously been aware that it would. I don’t know how a person can come to any other conclusion when you see that volume of water because at the peak of volume, I looked down the canyon toward the mouth of the canyon and the mouth of the canyon, at any rate, was very nearly to spill over its banks. You might consider the top rim of the canyon as a bank of a ditch.

I don’t know how anybody could look at anything like that and not realize that there was not going to be one whale of a lot of water down in that valley. In what form? We had no idea, a ten foot wall as they had been saying, this type of thing, but I didn’t know. I probably unconsciously or my subconscious apparently knew it because I remember repeating it many times on the air that the towns were going to get a lot of water right in the downtown areas of Sugar City and Rexburg. I said St. Anthony on the tape too, because I wasn’t quite sure whether it would affect St. Anthony and Points West. I must have subconsciously knew that we were going you get a lot of water right in town. To what extent, who knows? A foot or two perhaps, but as it turned out considerably more.

AA: Did you have any talks with Governor Andrus shortly after the dam collapsed?
DE: Yes, quite a few as soon as they restored some telephone service. They had that emergency telephone centered at the college.

I had a policeman come to me the day of the flood. We were completely wiped out. At 2:40 that afternoon, my radio station ceased to exist. Many business people and others felt, on that particular day, they were wiped out. You were gone, your entire life, and it was very depressing. I think it was the next day, they had the disaster people up and they were getting organized up on the hill in the Army Reserve building and the college. A policeman came to me and said, “I have a message for you. You are to call Gene Shumate in Salmon, Idaho.” Gene lived here for quite awhile before he sold the radio station to me and by that time was living in Salmon. Gene was a good friend of Governor Andrus and I knew Cecil too. I went to the telephone center and called Gene in Salmon and he told me, “I have been talking with the governor and the governor feels that the sooner you get your radio station back on the air, the better, as a message center. Become part of the community as rapidly as you can again so you can get the station back on the air as quickly as you can.” I said, “All I have left, Gene, is a tower.” He said, “I know that. I’ve talked with the governor. The governor has some news for you on that so you are to call him.” I said, “Fine.” I hung up and then I called the governor in Boise and talked. He and I talked to his aide and they had already put the wheels in motion to rebuild the station. They had already talked to people from RCA in New Jersey by telephone and those people had agreed to bring up emergency type equipment by plane with some engineers to get the station rebuilt as rapidly as possible. They were already in the process.

At the time I talked to the governor on that particular day, he told me that back east they were in the process of loading a transmitter on an airplane along with the very basic ideas to make it to a radio station: transmitter, one microphone, one turntable and one little four channel console. Just the bare necessitates and they were already loading it on the airplane and it would be here with the next few days.

The studio downtown was completely obliterated. I went to a local mobile home dealer. I said, “I want to buy that mobile home. Pull it out to where the radio tower was.” Everything was still very muddy and the road out by the cemetery was wiped out. He didn’t know if he could get the trailer out here or not. He said, “We could sure try.” They did a good job. It was Wayne Egan at Rexburg Mobile Homes. They managed to pull the trailer out there and set it up and leveled it the best they could. This was probably the next day.

A week had elapsed. I think it was on a Saturday when the engineers from RCS and the equipment arrived by plane into Idaho Falls. The National Guard volunteered a truck to bring it up from Idaho Falls. By that time Mr. Egan had this trailer set up. The engineers went to work day and night putting things together quickly for us. As I said, the only thing left was the tower, but they had the basic equipment with them to broadcast and set it up. Four days after they arrived here we were back on the air. We were back on the air eleven days after the flood had happened.

Going back to your original question, “Did I have contact with Governor Andrus?” I most certainly did. As a matter of fact, I had to talk to his office many times the following three or four days. It was actually through his office that I worked toward the RCA people. It was a great help. I told Governor Andrus this many times and I
repeat it again now that he actually, more or less, saved my life. I was going to pack up socks and shoes and leave the country. There wasn’t anything else to stay here for. But he did help a lot through his office. He made things happen quickly and rapidly. It all originated back to Gene Shumate, who first called him and talked to him, explained to him the problem and they got right on it immediately and got a hold of people from RCA. They were tremendous.

The people from RCA couldn’t have been better. The equipment they brought out they said, “We are just loaning this to you. There will be no charge. Later, if you want to buy it fine, but don’t worry about it. If you don’t want it, just return it.” Consequently, they were kind about it. They sent these engineers out free. It didn’t cost me anything so when the time came to re-equip my station, I got it from RCA.

AA: You had a lot of dealings with the Bureau of Reclamation, haven’t you, since that time?

DE: I had no trouble with my claim at all.

AA: Has this been the process?

DE: Yes, for the radio station. Another claim is still in the process of being processed for the cable television, which I am involved with here too, a separate claim. That claim is still being processed.

AA: Would you say then that your relationship with the Bureau is a very favorable relationship?

DE: Couldn’t be better. As a matter of fact, I can’t say enough good things about those people. All last winter, practically almost last year, we conducted weekly programs with the Bureau of Reclamation people, from the claims office here. They would come into our station and conduct an hourly program with them, taking telephone calls from citizens who wanted to ask questions about their claims. We got along well with the members of the Bureau. As I say, under the situation, the people who had to work with them did a fantastic job. I have nothing but good to say about the claim feature.

AA: Did you deal with any other government agencies besides the Bureau? Agencies, like the Small Business Administration?

DE: Yes, we had to make a SBA loan, immediately. It was one of the first things we did. We got along reasonably well with the SBA. We had no more than the usual problems you associate with the federal agency like that. Ordinarily, the Small Business Administration would not make a loan to a radio or a television station. There is something in their law, something that they cannot make loans to broadcasting people, newspaper, or media. In other words, under normal circumstances, I couldn’t go to the SBA and borrow money because it’s against their rules. But in a disaster situation, things completely changed and they could make their loads, which they did. They made a loan
and there were no problems at all. I got along pretty well with the SBA people for the most part, just one or two minor things.

AA: It’s been over a year since the flood and you’re set up now out here by the Rexburg Cemetery.

DE: I probably came out here to liven things up a little.

AA: How do you feel about the flood, the business and about your way of life now? Is it a little better than a year after this took place?

DE: Everything would have been fine if the flood hadn’t of happened. Frankly, I have to be perfectly honest, discounting the tragic loss of life, discounting the mental strain on so many people, I honestly believe that as of today, the area is now a better area than it was prior to the flood. I honestly believe this. There are small areas like the Wilford area, where there is so much land damage that it will probably never be used again. I sincerely believe by the percentage that the area is a better area than it was before. Not only because of the business climate, but because the business community has mostly all new facilities. I have a new facility.

I’m in better shape now than I was prior to the flood. I have new equipment. The economy couldn’t be better. I mean after all, you can’t drop 155 million dollars into Madison and Fremont Counties, which is how much has been paid through the Bureau of Reclamation to claimants up to this time, without some dividends. I talked to Mr. Schafer of the Bureau office and he said, at that point, it had been 155 million dollars in claims paid out of his office for the Madison and Fremont county area. I realize that it all goes back into homes to re-establish your business and in rebuilding new businesses but, at the same time, it’s money being spent and people are earning this money. Consider the value to the economy of the area, not only in Rexburg but in the whole valley. I can show you business houses in Salt Lake City that have profited off this.

The dam was a tragic, terrible thing. People lost their lives. This is something you cannot really accept. Discounting some of the things that I mentioned, the mental anguish of the people, I think that the area is a better one. Some people think that’s a little strange but I honestly believe that. I think a lot of people understand each other a little better. I think the person-to-person relationships in the area have been improved. Tragedy like this tends to bring people a little closer together afterwards.

In these ways I think the areas has profited. You might say, “How do you profit out of a tragedy of that kind?” The benefits outweigh the destruction or the detractions. It isn’t the nicest thing to talk about, a person wouldn’t want to see it happen again. At the same time we’re very fortunate around here. This area is completely recovered. All you have to do is to look at some of the other areas around the nation that had disasters and they never recuperate. Some places never recuperate completely, but we did. Look at the areas of Rexburg and Sugar City; they’re practically back to normal with a few exceptions. I think the area’s in better shape.
AA: You mentioned that the disaster helped to bring people in the community a little closer together in their efforts to clean up the mess. Was there anything in the cleanup operations that impressed you more than anything else?

DE: The outside people that came in to help clean up was very impressive. The LDS church was the major driving force behind this. So many people, from out of the area, came in to help. This particular instance sticks in my mind, but there are hundreds of others just like it. Driving down on 2nd West 25 to 30 young boys and girls, from the same ward, were shoveling dirt out of the gutter, throwing it in wheelbarrows, and wheeling it over and putting it in trucks. You can’t ignore something like that and this is just one instance.

I have a friend who tried to clean out his basement. He was trying to do it by himself and wasn’t all that strong anyway. Suddenly, someone knocked on his door and here was a young person who said, “Do you need some help?” “I sure do!” he said. The next thing he knew, several young people flocked into his home and began shoveling mud and tearing out carpets. He had to just stand back and watch it.

There were a few little instances that take away a little bit of that good flavor. I had one man out to the radio station one day and he brought a crew from Utah, some young people. He came out to my station, he was very angry. He wanted me to broadcast something and I said, “What’s the matter?” They had put him and his crew doing something like cleaning up a certain area that he didn’t think they should. I can’t tell you what. They felt like they didn’t have to clean it up. They preferred to do this other thing, which irritated me very much. I told the man, “If you came here to help clean up, clean up! If you didn’t go home!” There were minor things, but he didn’t feel like his crew should be doing this particular thing it was assigned to. That kind of irritated me, but it was very minor and you didn’t see that too often.

AA: Were there other religious organizations who were active in post flood operations?

DE: Yes, all kinds of them.

AA: Did you have anything to do with them? Did they ever contact you?

DE: Do you mean other than LDS church people? The Interfaith people were great, they can’t get enough credit. I received a letter one day in the mail. This was weeks after the flood. I’m not sure whether the mayor acknowledged this or not, I hope he did. I had a letter from a woman, I don’t remember for sure exactly where, but it runs in my mind it was Indiana. This woman sent a letter addressed to the radio station in Rexburg, Idaho. In the letter was a check for maybe ten or eleven dollars, very small. That was money that a girl’s scout troop sent. I’m not sure because I don’t remember. I’d have to get the word out, but the point is that in that letter was a check for about ten dollars. It had all been donated. All had been given by young girls. I get the impression they were pre-teen as far as age is concerned. It was signed by ten or twelve girls. The letter read simply, “We hope this money helps our people back there.” Something like that is fantastic. I didn’t know what to do with the money so I took it down and gave it to the mayor. I have him a copy of the letter too. He said, “Fine, we’ll put it in our fund and
we’ll acknowledge it.” I hope he did. I know that I wrote them a letter and thanked them very much for it.

AA: Restores your faith in humanity, doesn’t it?

DE: It certainly does!

AA: I have one more question. Do you feel that the dam should be rebuilt?

DE: I don’t see any reason why not to build it. I mean the reasons for the dam in the first place are still there. The fact that the dam broke didn’t change the reasons for building the dam. I feel that if they do rebuild the dam, I doubt whether they will use the exact same site on the exact location in the canyon. I understand now that they are not going to. But if they should ever rebuild the dam, there’s no question in my mind that I would live at the foot of it forever. This time they’ll build the best damn little dam you ever saw. They’re not going to let that thing go again. The reasons for the dam, in the first place, are still there. Suppose the dam had remained. The dam would have been a life-saver this year because of our water situation, and who is to say this won’t happen again in the future. So why not build it again. If they want to put that much moony back into it, build one that will not break. I have talked to people who say they would move if they ever rebuilt the dam. The percentage of people that say that is very small. You’ve got to respect their opinion. But a lot of people that I’ve talked to say the same thing, “Sure, why not rebuild.”

AA: Is there anything else you’d like to talk about in reaction to this disaster before we terminate the interview?

DE: I think we’ve used up all the time that you probably have and then some.

AA: Thank you, Mr. Ellis.