The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Ellen Genta – Life During the Teton Flood

By Ellen Genta

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Box 6 Folder 23

Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
CS: Ellen, would you spell your name please?
EG: E-L-L-E-N G-E-N-T-A.
CS: Ellen, how old are you?
EG: Sixty years old.
CS: Where were you born?
EG: La Belle, Idaho.
CS: When were you born?
EG: March 30, 1917.
CS: How long have you lived here in Rexburg?
EG: Since 1935.
CS: What was your address at the time of the flood?
EG: 153 South 1st West in Rexburg.
CS: Do you have a family?
EG: Yes, ma’am.
CS: How many people were living in your home at the time of the flood?
EG: One daughter.
CS: And your husband and yourself?
EG: Yes.
CS: What do you do for a living?
EG: I am a social products buyer and sales coordinator at Ricks College Bookstore.
CS: Prior to the construction of the Teton Dam, were you in favor of it or not?
EG: I didn’t have any particular objections to it. Only I would have liked to have had it more thoroughly investigated before it was built.
CS: Did you own your own home prior to the flood?
EG: Yes.

CS: Do you recall, looking back to that day, where you were and what you were doing when you first heard that the dam had broke? What was your initial reaction to that?

EG: I was here at home, just doing housework and the phone rang. My daughter, Carol Mason called me and said, “Have you had your radio on?” I said, “No,” She said, “You’d better get it on. The Teton Dam has broken.” I, of course, disagreed with her. She said, “It’s the truth, turn your radio on and see.” So I did and found out it was a fact.

CS: How did you feel about that?

EG: Well, I believed it, but I was pretty numb with shock. It took me quite a few minutes to make any of the rest of the family believe it, that it could be a fact and that we had to get busy and do something. We were told over the radio that it would be down in Rexburg in less than an hour and I couldn’t make my family believe it. Right at the time that it happened, my son, Errol, and his wife from Caldwell, Idaho, drove up about ten minutes after we heard the news. I was really still excited so I rushed out to the car and told them, stay in the car and turn around and go back to Caldwell, we were in the flood. They said they had heard it over the radio too and said, “Let us come in and help you.” They came in and I said, “Well, you’d better help, you’d better get busy or else go back.” So I quickly assigned each of their family, they and their three children, something to do, like moving books from lower shelf, lifting drawers out of bedroom sets. Any drawer that was available we lifted to a higher spot. That way we saved most of the drawers with good things in them. We saved nearly all of our books. I had a hard time convincing them that we should bring things out of the basement. Nobody would believe me in that. After a period of time I got really excited and started screaming at them. One of the youngsters said, “Grandma, what are you screaming for; don’t get so excited.” So I said, “Well, if you had been through a flood like I did when I was a child.” I was in the Gros Ventre flood in La Belle, Idaho. We moved out of our homes overnight for two or three nights and lived, packed in sleeping bags in the top of a two story building at Rigby, Idaho, all cramped up about fifty people to one room. We didn’t lose so much in that flood, except maybe some stock, and chickens, our homes weren’t destroyed. But it was an extremely exciting and also a frightening experience and I will always remember it because my parents were so upset. There were things lost, I remember that. So right now I got really excited. If they could have been in that flood, they would get excited and move faster. So this convinced my husband and son that they should go into the basement and bring out the gun collection and important things like that. My daughter’s new typewriter was on the basement floor, also a new sewing machine. I couldn’t get them to realize that it was important to bring these things up. They just left them. So I went down
and packed these heavy articles out myself and put them in the car, so we could take them out. And, of course, we saved them. That was exciting.

CS: Where did you go when you left your home?

EG: When we finally left our home, we went up the hill by the college, where we met our oldest daughter, Carol, and her family. We waited there and watched the flood come in, watched the water move in on our house, then we ran back up the hill to be away from it.

CS: What did the water look like when it came in?

EG: I don't think there's any words that can describe that. It was just a cauldron of boiling mud, water, just black, dirty, logs, limbs, what have you. We saw houses floating, trailer houses, just all kinds of debris. It was just unimaginable to anybody. No one could believe what this water looked like coming in, that banks, or the walls of it and the swiftness of it. The waves washed and swirled. I don’t think anybody could believe it, that didn’t see it.

CS: Now, from where you were up on the hill, could you see when your home was engulfed by it?

EG: Not entirely, buildings and trees covered part of our home. My husband saw it. We saw it wash a half a block away by the post office, we were in a position where we could watch it. The post office is exactly through the block east of us on the same block and we watched it engulf the post office and knew that when it hit the post office that it would come right though to our home.

CS: When were you first able to move to your home? What did you find when you did return?

EG: We returned Sunday morning and walked in through the driveway and mud about half way up our legs. It was still that deep at our place. We managed to get the doors open. I had foolishly rolled up several rugs and banked them around the doors, assuming I’d keep the water out, and we kicked them out of the way and came in and we had about three inches of solid mud clear through the house on all of our new carpets which were less than a year old. Mud was in all the cabinet areas and drawers that had been left in, they were full of mud and water. The basement was full. there was no way we could even get in to the basement—clear up to the steps, clear up to the floor level was still solid water.

CS: What sort of thought went through your mind as you saw this?

EG: Well, first I wanted to cry, and then I decided that wouldn’t do any good. Our daughter, Lori, cried. She was quite upset and I knew if I let myself cry, I would start her crying. Mainly, my husband used some fairly strong language, rather
than crying and I think that kind of calmed us all down and made us think, well, the only thing we can do is get in and clean the thing up. At least we didn’t lose our house.

CS: Over the course of the next few days, where did you stay, where did you go?

EG: The first night, we stayed with Dr. and Mrs. Jay Risenmay. The next five or six nights we stayed in Archer at the home of Henry and DaVide Ericson, who are the parent’s of our son Errol’s wife, Joanne. They fed us and let us sleep there. They came in with us Monday and helped us go through the house, tear up the carpet and worked right with us for four or five days, helping us clean the house out.

CS: So, when you started cleaning the house out, did you have mostly family helping or did you have any outside volunteers?

EG: We had no outside volunteers, except for one boy that stopped that knew our son and worked for about three hours. Otherwise, our son Errol, and his family from Caldwell helped. They came back another day, and stayed two days and helped us. Our son Gordon who is in medical school at University of Utah got permission to leave and came and stayed two days and two nights, and cleaned and helped. Of course, our daughter, Lori, helped. We had another relative, Lawrence and Margaret Free from Lorenzo came up, when they could finally get through the blockade. Another cousin, Dee Simmons, came up and helped us haul furniture and mud out. In probably two weeks my brother Darrel Gallup, who works for Soil Conservation in Boise, came over and helped us clean mud from the driveways and the patio and different areas like that. He worked steady with us. Other than that, the rest of the work was done by my husband, myself and our daughter, Lori. The rest of our family were all involved in the flood and had homes of their own to clean up.

CS: At this time was there ever a moment when you felt totally in despair or completely hopeless?

EG: Usually while I was scrubbing I was pretty down. I spent the first week at home, the school gave the employees at Ricks College the first week off to stay home and take care of their homes. My home was the least damaged; however, it had eighteen inches of water on the main floor. Some of the others lost their homes, so the second week, the manager told me I would have to go back to work and let some of the others who were in worse circumstances stay home and take care of their homes. I think I had as much mud as they did to clean, but I still had to go back to work. So I had to scrub at night and on Saturdays and Sundays, or whatever time I could find to work. I had to stay home and work. While I was scrubbing I was thinking—I was pretty despondent sometimes—I would think of my sister, Grace Forsyth, over in Sugar City, who lost her home and almost everything they have in it. So I would think, well, Grace lost her home and I didn’t. If she can get by, I can. So I would scrub a little while longer, then I’d get
more mud and dirt scrubbed out. Soon I’d get tired and start crying again. Then I’d think, well, if Grace can do it, then I can. So that would shut me up and I’d go back to work. This went on for five or six weeks.

CS: What did you feel was the most overwhelming problem that you had on your mind? What thing seemed to preoccupy you more than anything else? Or one certain fear that you had that particularly bothered you?

EG: I think the main thing that did bother us was if we would ever get the house and the yard back in livable condition. After five days of staying out at the Ericson’s and them being so wonderful to us, we felt like we had to come back home, so we got a hot plate and the Red Cross brought us some mattresses. Some of our bedding hadn’t been destroyed in upper shelves, so we moved back in the house, spread newspaper on what floors we weren’t working on, heated water and cooked our meals on the hot plate, going up to the college once a day at least for a good meal. The main thing that bothered us was, would we ever get it back so that it looked at least normal and would we be able to get help that would financially help us repay what we had lost?

CS: In your dealings with these organizations, the Red Cross, the LDS church, and the government, how would you assess their effectiveness in the roles that they played?

EG: I don’t think that anyone will tell me over again that the Red Cross is anything but a good organization. We were very, very pleased. I watched this from Rick’s College, myself, and saw how they responded and how they helped people and how they came in and gave time, money and people. They worked with the college and with the LDS church to make a very smooth operation. I was very satisfied with them. As far as the LDS church, I happen to be a Latter-day Saint myself, but I have never heard or known of any organization that was as well organized and worked as hard and put forth as much effort to overcome the situation in a large area in the whole community. I don’t think there is anybody who will ever be able to thank all these other people who come in or to ever let them know what they did. This community wouldn’t be back together now if people from all these other wards, stakes, even other churches had not helped. I know the Mennonite people came in and worked. I know homes where they worked and other faiths came in. I don’t think we’d ever even been back if they hadn’t come and helped us. The BOR, I think was good. I don’t know in all circumstances, but the worked real well with us. So far we feel quite satisfied with what we received and what we did. At present we still have some problems, we will still have to make another claim on the exterior of our home, but with what they did for us, we have been very satisfied.

CS: Now there has been some talk about people who have filled fraudulent claims, with the BOR, are you aware of any?
EG: Not actually, I don’t know of any that have filed fraudulent claims, I do know that some people received more per hour in wages for cleaning their homes up than we did. We talked this over with the verifier and I think that in view of our labor, it was just as hard as anybody else’s. I do know for a fact, I won’t mention names, but I do know that many people got two and three dollars more an hour for the labor of cleaning and repairing their homes than we did. We got a very minimum amount. Other than that, as far as handling our furniture and things like that, so far they did everything we asked for. We made what we thought was a very reasonable claim. Our piano cost us very much more than what we claimed. We still have to do something about that. I don’t know what they will do, but we intend to. We have been advised by piano companies and piano people that are working with this sort of thing that this piano cannot be repaired or put back where it was even though we spent a considerable sum, $670, trying to repair it. We tried to repair some of our furniture and we have come out pretty well. I think we were treated fairly and I don’t know of anybody, really, that absolutely made fraudulent claims. I had one person tell me that I should ask for everything I ever wanted in this world, this was my chance to get it, This person’s name I won’t mention either, but it turned me off till I thought that if that is how the people are going to act, somebody ought to do something about it. I think that every time we wrote down a part of our claim I thought of this person and it made me determined to make a claim that was reasonable and honest. So this is how we went ahead and did ours.

CS: There has been a lot of talk also that in rebuilding that a lot of outside contractors and subcontractors have come into town and taken advantage of the situation, are you aware of any of this happening?

EG: The only thing I know is hearsay, I don’t know any actual incidents. I have heard this has happened. I know some of the names of people that this has happened to, but actually I can’t prove any particular incident.

CS: Being an older person and having a family, and younger people, like a granddaughter, that was involved, as you have watched people in the community recover from the flood, have you noticed any particular differences in the response to the disaster between the older and the younger people?

EG: I think the really old people like in the seventies and eighties and older took it harder and it affected them psychologically far worse. I think the younger people that were just getting started, like my daughter Cathy and my granddaughter Barbara, it affected far worse, because they have never been through any tragedies or any of these problems, they haven’t had to face so much. Just getting started they thought everything they had was lost and that they would never have anything back. I think the middle-age bracket, I put myself in the middle-age bracket, but I the middle-age bracket took it better than the others because they knew they had a few years left to get back a little bit. Most of us had also had tragedies of one kind or another, or faced hardships and faced hard work, lots
more hard work than young people face now. We knew that we could do it, so I think this age bracket took it better than the real young or the real old.

CS: Do you think there has been any difference in response to the whole experience between LDS people than in the non-LDS people, or even between active LDS people and inactive, as far as bouncing back, or bitterness or these kinds of things?

EG: Mainly, I think, I know several people that are not LDS that have bounced back, but they also belong to another church and have quite a lot of faith and hope taught to them. I think the more active LDS people have bounced back better because of their faith and because of the teachings that have been set up to them and the way that their fellow members responded made them sit up and think twice. I think they have bounce back better than people that don’t have any religion at all.

CS: As you have looked at the community in general and the community response, what sort of good things have you seen happen to Rexburg because of this, and perhaps also what kind of negative things have you seen come out of this whole experience?

EG: Well, Positively I think it has brought the whole community together. I think any kind of disaster or sadness or bereavement of any kind generally does this for people, and I think it certainly did here, because this time when the flood came through in the area that it hit it was no respecter of persons. The rich and the poor and the weak and the strong all got the same dose. I think it brought people closer together than they ever have before. I think positively, too, I would say as far as small communities, Sugar and Wilford, although they lost more than they can ever get back. Spiritually and in mementos and things like that, their community and their area itself is going to be better than it ever was. I am speaking not physically, I am speaking of the beautification of the city and the living quarters and things like this will be better than they have ever had. The town of Rexburg is going to be a beautiful city when it is complete. It will be a town we are going to be proud of. Rexburg always was one of the prettiest, best laid out, cleanest towns in the state of Idaho or in the west, as far as I am concerned. I’ve heard people come to Rick’s College say this is one of the prettiest towns they have ever seen, I’ve heard this as far back as thirty years ago. It will be again when they get finished, it will be one of the prettiest towns. So positively, there are some good things. Negatively, I don’t think that a lot of people will ever get over the shock of it. Regardless of the kind of home, even if you put them in a palace they still are not going to get over the shock of it. They will look back on it and it will just plain shock them. There will be some areas that will never be rebuilt. It affected the economy of the town to begin with, drastically, and some of those people will be a long time getting back on their feet.