DM: This is an oral history. I am Dennis McCurdy and today is April 19, 1977. I am going to interview George Arliss Willmore. The general topic will be the Teton Dam disaster. Mr. Willmore, where were you born?

GW: Here in Rexburg, Hibbard actually, June 4, 1935.

DM: How long have you lived in this area?

GW: All my life except for the time I was in the service, which was from 1961 until 1970. Then three years in South America, Columbia.

DM: What is your occupation?

GW: I have an industrial chemical company and do a little farming and real estate construction business.

DM: Now on the day of June 5th, what was your first knowledge and some of the subsequent events that followed after your first learning about the breakage of the dam?

GW: Our chemical business was located in Sugar City, the actual [address] I think is 709 East Main Street. And I was there Saturday working at the office when Dee Harris came by, and said there’s a possibility of the dam breaking. That was my first knowledge. It was somewhere around eleven that Saturday morning.

DM: What followed after that?

GW: Well, a long chain of events developed. One of the first things that I did was to leave Sugar City and my wife was with me, Judy, and we proceeded to Rexburg immediately. Mother and Dad [were] living on South 2nd East. I knew that they would be in danger so I alerted them of what was happening and picked up their telephone and called Boise Idaho, the Governor’s Office. I tried to reach him, but he was not in. So then I tried to reach Darrell Manning who was Director of Transportation and found that he was on reserve duty at Gowen Field at Boise. So then I called the Commanding General’s Office and they put me with Darrell Manning, and I informed him that the Teton Dam had broken and that the flood was imminent and would be a major catastrophe. He thought I was joking at first, but I convinced him that it was true, and I recommended that if at all possible they ought to alert the helicopters because there was a possibility of a number being killed because of the width and breadth of the valley and the height that the water was. After that transpired, I took my mother and my father up to our home, which was located on Mohawk Avenue, which was [in] the east section or higher section of town up on the hill. Then after I left them at home, I proceeded down to the radio station. The radio station was announcing intermittently that the dam was leaking and water was coming through it. And I felt the need to perhaps assist them because I’d had eight and a half years experience in the service, two years of that in Vietnam serving in a combat assault helicopter company. So I went to the radio station and recommended that they go full alert that they no longer play the music, but that they
instruct and inform the people in what they ought to do. I even recommended that they call for the Civil Defense over the air so that they could have one representative at the radio station. They never did show up however. The next thing that was recommended that they announce that the people up on the hill or higher places fill containers of water so that if the well be contaminated there would be plenty of water for the people to drink for three or four days, until some emergency situation could be provided for them. At the same time I picked up the telephone and called the FAA tower in Idaho Falls and asked them to put us in touch with one of the airplanes to provide us with an up to date report on how fast the water was coming, how high the water was, and how wide the wall of water was. They did that, and that was a great help because it have us up to the minutes times as to where the water was and what was happening. The State Patrol had come into the radio station and wanted them to announce over the air to have some people come down to Rexburg city center and around the Teton River to start sandbagging. I recommended that it not be done realizing that with the depth of the water and the time it would take to get sand bags and people, that it would be impossible, and that it not be done. I told them that if they had a D-8 Caterpillar, it would be wise to go out and push up a dike around the radio tower to prevent the wall of water from knocking down the tower, not realizing that perhaps the power would be turned off anyway by Utah Power and Light. After the power was shut off at the radio station, I left there and went up to the reserve center where the city officials, the county commissioners and the reserve people had gathered to try and put together some type of an organization. It was really mass confusion. That day a helicopter was available from Rocky Mountain Helicopters, and they put me in charge of coordinating all of the helicopter operations. About two o’clock in the afternoon word was received that there was a boy in a tree just north of Teton City. They wanted to know if they could take him out by helicopter. So I got Sam Buckly (owner of Rocky Mountain Helicopters) and we went directly to Teton. They directed us where to land, and we found that the Briggs boy, who had been with the Bensen boy fishing in the narrows or down in the Teton Canyon, had floated approximately three miles or four miles, I’m not sure of the distance, down that river. And he had caught a limb of that tree and was up in the tree. That water at that time under the tree, as I can see it now, was about twenty-five feet deep. The thing that we did after I got there was ask them if they had a chain saw, and they found a chain saw at a neighbor’s. We didn’t have a stretcher or any basket at that time so I asked them if they could find a large plank or something of that sort and one of the men said yes, we have a door to a home, brought it over and we went in boats over from the bank was approximately fifty yards over to the tree. The water was running very swiftly underneath, and we took the chain saw and cut the under limbs out and then cut holes in the door so that we could strap him on. At that time another helicopter arrived with the paramedics. They did have a basket, and they came over by boat. And I remember climbing the tree and telling the Briggs boy we were there, we had helicopters that he would be in good hands. I remember looking into his face, and it was about the size of a large watermelon and it looked like he had been beaten with a cat-o-nine-tails [a whip]. His body was bruised and there was marks all over it. My experience in South America working with Potlatch Forest, the natives would bring the logs in and when these logs were in the water and it was turbulent, they were just like torpedoes. And I can just imagine that the three miles or four miles that this young man was able to cling to life,
either by holding or swimming through the debris and being knocked around would probably be one of the most interesting events that happened during the flood. Anyway, we got the boy down, took him across that water, put him in the basket, put him in the helicopter, strapped him to the outside, he was actually in the basket attached to the skids, and the paramedic gave him an IV, flew him to St. Anthony and from there he flew to Idaho Falls in a military helicopter. After that event I came back to Rexburg and coordinated the helicopter flights. I guess I used it a little bit like we did in Vietnam, I selected one ship as what we called Command Control and lifted into the air, and we had three other ships that were on the ground. And as the need arose we would call those ships off the ground and to those areas for pickup, rescue, or whatever was the case. This proved to be very beneficial because as soon as we lifted off we found that one of the gas storage facilities that the water had broken one of the tanks and broke in some way that it caused a fire, and escaped in flames and fuel was spilling all over and running on top of the water and into the various homes. We called in at that time and requested that the Bureau of Reclamation furnish helicopters with fire retardant and water drop capability, and they seemed to respond immediately. And those helicopters came up and contained the fire that could have been very catastrophic to the rest of the buildings that were standing.

After that transpired, I remember landing at the Rexburg Cemetery, and in one of the big pine trees a Volkswagen was setting almost in the top of it. It seemed like when the water hit the tree must of went down and the Volkswagen went over it and as the water receded the tree sprang back up, but it looked like literally that the Volkswagen jumped right up into that tree. We were checking trailer houses, campers, and they were strung all over. And every door we opened we thought we would find someone in there, but fortunately there were very few deaths, and we found no people caught in those circumstances. I think one of the things that really helped that was the efficient operations of the local police and the radio that allowed the people knowledge, as to what was happening every hour or fifteen minutes during this event. I think another important factor was the CB radio that people were free to communicate with others, and it played an important part in rescue and alerting the people.

After I got back from the helicopter flights, they still didn’t have any organization or who was going to conduct what. Civil Defense didn’t know if the County Commissioners or if the city had its role or who was in charge. I remember walking to the front of the room and just out loud saying “at ease” and getting their attention, I said somehow we got to have an organization. And I got a piece of chalk on the blackboard and drew out an organization chart similar to the military, with the commanding officers at the top and on down to the staff members and those who would participate. We had the Red Cross and the Health and Welfare, we had the LDS Church, and we selected a person to head each of those areas and then set up tables and chairs. And that night I stayed with a secretary typing this information, running it off on a copy machine so that the next morning there would be complete organization for those people to function from. That seemed to help out somewhat. I don’t take any credit for that, the only reason that some of these things were done on my part was because of the experience I had in the military. I had that training and if I hadn’t have done that I certainly wouldn’t have been doing my duty in any way, shape, or form.
After that period of time I flew over five hours of rescue missions with the military. I remember, I believe it was Sunday, I landed over in Sugar City in front of my business to inspect it, and as I got out of the helicopter and walked over to the business I noticed something inside. As I walked closer and looked into the office, I noticed a large Holstein cow that was still alive that had been washed in by the flood in muck clear up to her hips. I knocked down the door and tried to move some of the garbage and muck. And after I cleared away a little stuff and she began to feel some freedom she charged out of there like someone had hit her with a hotshot!

After that it was a matter of trying to take care of the flood. I remember in the area of Hibbard and Plano, we looked at the roads and the highways and all of those north and south highways, and the roads were stripped in sections of one hundred to two hundred feet and were laying in strips. Power lines were down, trailers were like ice cubes in water, homes toppled down or exploded on impact, it was just a great force of the water coming down.

DM: What was the effect of Ricks College on the disaster relief?

GW: Ricks was just marvelous. The facilities that were up on the higher elevations, with the President and staff, provided food and a base for the Red Cross, and they brought in all the emergency services and located them there. It was a local point. The people did a marvelous role of recovery. I’ve been in some situations similar to this where the people just fell apart there was no place to go or anything. The LDS Church was a great source of strength for the people they were very capable in their organization. They provided tools for cleanup, and help came in from all areas from Priesthood quorums to provide assistance to us. They did a tremendous job, and it was very beneficial. The town had recovered beautifully. It’s growing in leaps and bounds, new homes going up all over the place, the spirit of the people is undaunted, very few I believe have moved away. Most are right here rebuilding, redoing, kind of pioneer work, putting this country back in shape.

DM: Is there anything else you could mention?

GW: It is an experience I wouldn’t want to go through again. I’ve witnessed B-52 strikes in Vietnam and all manners of warlike devastation, but only once have I witnessed this. It is very destructive and it was quiet, there wasn’t a lot of noise, up on the hill you could see the buildings and things move with such ease and grace. It was just unbelievable.

DM: Thank you very much Mr. Willmore. This tape will be placed in the library for future research.