The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

H. Lynn Williams – Life during the Teton Flood

By H. Lynn Williams

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Box 9 Folder 14

Oral Interview conducted by Michael Bell

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
MB: I’m Mike Bell. Today is April 19, 1977. I’m going to interview Lynn Williams. The general topic will be the Teton Flood. Mr. Williams, will you please state your name and then spell it?


MB: Where were you born?

LW: Pocatello, Idaho.

MB: How long have you lived in Salem?

LW: For the past ten years.

MB: Where were your parents born?

LW: Iona, Idaho.

MB: What is your occupation?

LW: I am a teacher.

MB: What were your feelings when the dam was first being built?

LW: Well, I have always been kind of an environmentalist and I didn’t feel this was a necessary venture and I felt it was shutting off the major trout streams that were left in the country. So, I hated to see it built. I didn’t think that the water that was to be provided for it or the recreation was worth the damage it was doing to the beautiful camping areas or the clear-running streams.

MB: What were you doing and where were you at the time when the dam broke?

LW: Well, that morning we were hauling a load of hay and me and my boys were out at the barn at about ten-thirty or eleven. This was June 5. A pickup came down the road driven by a boy who was probably in his late teens. He honked out in front for us for a long time and walked out to the barn and yelled to us that the dam was broken and he told us to get out of there and we looked at him because we didn’t really know whether he was telling the truth or just pulling our leg.

MB: Could you tell us something like what happened—like the damage and what you saw when it came? How much water or as soon as you found out about it did you think it was just going to be a little bit of water or just exactly what were your thoughts?

LW: Yeah, that is a pretty well what we thought. We came to the house after he warned us and we had the report verified that the dam had broken. Our first thoughts were that we were over ten miles away and that if the water did reach us, it wouldn’t be very deep.
Maybe, a foot or two. Two at the most. So, we decided that we would take the outfits and go to town but that we wouldn’t take anything from our house so my wife got the kids into the car and she left but I stayed here because I was a little bit afraid that the looters coming in, you know, with maybe a foot of water anybody could have gotten in with a truck or what-not and could raid up what you have so I said I would stay here and protect from looters and they went to town thinking that they would be back in a few hours. We were so certain of this that our girls didn’t wear shoes to town. That she thought that she would be back in just a little while so they left. It was a few days later that they finally got back.

MB: Did it get anything like get any of your books all over the ground or anything like that?

LW: No, it didn’t get anything in the house. I came in, it was about twelve when they got out of here and I drove the truck, backed it up to the south end of the house. It had an end on it so that I could be up on the house if the water got high enough. I would be safe there. Then I came down in the house and turned the radio on and listened to the radio and heard a report of Don Ellis, the radio announcer that was up there watching the dam break and him reporting the size of the water, the wall of water that was coming across the plain and it was about then that I began to think that maybe there would be some water here. It wasn’t long after that about one that the electricity went off and I wasn’t able to have radio contact anymore and then I got up on the house, it was a blistering summer afternoon, just really warm up on the roof and I sat there up on the roof and just kind of watched and waited. About one-fifteen as I looked out towards the north and the east, I could see up towards my feedlot. This is the riverbed for the north end of the Teton. I could see just all of the foliage and all of the trees along the river that were going under and how the houses were just going under that would never be seen again and up towards Mars feedlot you could see just, just—what it looked like wasn’t a wall of water. It looked like a big wall of dirt, just a tremendous wall or dike of dirt it had so much mud in it. But, by then I really thought, Boy, I should really get out of here because I could see how far and high it was and that there was really going to be some trouble but I realized that the South Fork of the Teton stood between me and the river so I couldn’t go south and I couldn’t go north cause there was the North Fork and if I went straight west, there was the Snake River down there and there would not be any crossing it because it would swell to the point that no one would be crossing it so I figured that the only thing I could do was to stay on the roof of my house. I stayed there and after a few minutes, water was coming past me on the north and then spread out in the east and there were droves of cattle and they were running in front of it and running right into it just to stay ahead of it. We had five head of horses in the pasture across the street and long before the water ever reached those horses, they knew that it was coming and being that I could see it, I looked across and they were standing there, pawing the ground in a tight bunch and reared and looked up in that direction. They would get nervous whinnies every now and then and stomp their feet. You could just tell that they knew that something was coming—some kind of pending disaster. So, the water came and it came about three or four feet high. When it first came, when it first hit here, it was just taking fences down along here and it was driving the cattle in front of them and it drove the
horses clear through the pasture and on through the fence and then they got clear of it and were trying to run in front of it depending on how fast the water was going. I don’t know how fast the water was going but it was not so fast that the horses couldn’t stay in front of it when they were running where it was wide open. So, I just sat here that afternoon and watched divers of animals come by. I watched the two houses to the south of us be washed away. One of them rode on top on the water like a boat and the other one for some reason went down on the ground and just kind of draped along and swept along that way. The barn across the street came across and hit the neck end of our house and knocked a hole in it and took part of two walls out and I thought maybe our house would go but it didn’t. It stayed here and just lots of cows came by. We had a cow on our first step for a long time. There was an ivy here on the west side of the house so that when they would come by they would kind of swing around to this side and then they would come upstream, so to speak, and get in here and stand. The water was about five or six feet deep outside. Well, it was an easy six feet, specifically seven feet and they would float through here for hours. There was a little mole across the street that every cow that came by would try to get up on it. One time I counted twenty head of cows on it and the calves that came by wouldn’t have a chance. They would just keep on going. They just couldn’t get in amongst those cows unless they could just crowd in. But, just all kinds of things came by. A lot of funny things. TVs and chairs would come by together, those that belonged together. A lot of things—all kinds and assortment of equipment would come by all floating together in the same wash. I was up there from one or one-fifteen ‘til six that night and then I could see the water start going down. I got off the house and it was about waist deep then. I came around and came in to the house and saw the extent of the damage a barn had made on the north end. Whatever had been in the house was just tipped over and the water had been over the tops of the cupboards, I mean the cupboard tops, the counter tops. Everything was full of mud. There was just three to four inches of mud on the floor. Everything was just tipped over. Things had floated in here and then the water had gone down. It had just left them on their sides or their backs. Pianos, bookcases, and stereos and just everything all the beds were just soaked. It was really a mess. Back door had been torn off and water had come through there. Garage door had come off and water had come through there. That’s about it. We just….., I went out and there was a horse that had washed up right over here on this hill and I went over and covered it and went out and with my saddle and started riding it up to town and got as far to town as we could and then we had to get across the river there and it was at that point that I took the bridle and saddle off the horse and turned it loose and a helicopter was flying over and I signaled it and it took me up to Rexburg. I got there and I found my wife and family and they were pretty happy to see me ‘cause they were looking all afternoon through town as near as they could tell, our house was gone because they couldn’t see really well into the out-of-town. So they were pretty happy to see me. Next morning was a Sunday and we came back out, surveyed a little more and Monday we got up and started shoveling it out.

MB: Was the water still pretty high? How long did it take to go down?

LW: Sunday morning the water was all gone. Water was still in barrow pits and ditches and lakes here and there but there was no water in the house. There was mud and where
water could be trapped like bathtubs and toilets and places like that but otherwise the water had gone down.

MB: How fast was the water when it got to you? Was it going very fast?

LW: Oh, I’ll say, it was really moving fast. There was no way a person ever could have stood up in it or even swim up stream. I’ve heard people say that it was clocked at twenty miles per hour. It would be just like being out in the middle of a raging river in the middle of whitecaps, rapids and everything.

MB: So did you lose quite a bit of stuff? I mean a lot of stuff you couldn’t save?

LW: Oh yeah. We couldn’t save anything in the house. Oh there are a few articles of clothing that we washed off with the hose and then laundered them but as far as furnishings, anything like cupboards or drawers, the water just warped and separated and delaminated them all.

MB: How long did it take you to get all the mud and stuff cleaned out of your house?

LW: Oh, we spent a couple of weeks doing that and then we had to take all the plaster board off. We took the siding out of the outside and we had it down to where it was just practically the studs in the roof. Well, that was in the first part of June and it was the middle of February before we had our house put back together so we could move in. I guess about six or seven months of hard work.

MB: What about rebuilding the dam? Would you like to tell some of your feelings on that? Do you think they should?

LW: Oh, would you like me to say something on that?

MB: Sure.

LW: No, I feel, I was against it the first time for environmental reasons, and the second time I would be against it because I think it is an unsuitable site and I just couldn’t sleep nights that if it were here. So, if they did, I would move.

MB: That’s the way most people feel around here isn’t it?

LW: I don’t know. I have heard people comment both ways. So, I do not know if most people do or not.

MB: Isn’t there a problem here in the spring where it, the river, floods or overflows?

LW: Just a little. Just among the pastures and a margin over the river but that’s what I am used to. That is one thing that happens every year for hundreds of years, I guess. You just didn’t get use of your pasture ‘til a little later in the season