The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Iris Hoglund – Life During the Teton Flood

By Iris Hoglund

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Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
S: Iris, would you spell your name please?

H: I-R-I-S  H-O-G-L-U-N-D.

S: Iris, where were you born?

H: I was born here in Rexburg, Idaho.

S: And have you lived here all of your life?

H: No, I just lived here until I was 18, then I went to school in Utah.

S: Now, prior to the flood, did you own your own home?

H: Yes.

S: What was the location of the home you had?

H: Well, it is actually Route 4, Box 84. It’s a mile west of 5th West, just south of 88.

S: And is that the place where you now live?

H: Yes.

S: How old are you?

H: Let me figure out . . . fifty-four.

S: And do you have a family?

H: Yes, I have three daughters.

S: And was all of your family home with you at the time of the flood?

H: Right.

S: Prior to the construction of the Teton Dam, did you support it or were you opposed to it?

H: I thought it was fine. I think they need that type of thing for irrigation.

S: Now, looking back can you recall that day, what you were doing, where you were when you first heard that the dam had broken and what was your initial reaction to that news?
H: We were here at home. Ray was working outside and he usually has the radio going while he is working. And he came in and told us, and we turned on the radio. It didn’t seem real. I couldn’t really believe that it was true.

S: What did you do following that? Did you make any preparations?

H: Yes, we have a van and when we go camping, we just pile everything in it. So we started getting the van ready with our camping equipment. We put in different food supplies that we thought would be useful, like a big plastic thing of honey (how funny). Then we went downstairs and tried to put things up off the floor. We figured we’d get a little water, but not too much. So we started putting things up on higher shelves. I remember going over to my neighbor across the street, Giffords. She was worried about what to do. My sister called and they had gone up on the hill, and hadn’t made any preparations at home, no running water or anything. That was another thing we did, we filled a lot of containers with water and ran in the tub so that we’d have some water. We know that the water would be contaminated, undoubtedly. It still didn’t seem real, but it was really happening. We were listening to the radio.

I suggested to my neighbor that they try to get some things up away. They have quite a few little children, where we just have teenagers. My husband went over to my mother’s home. She’s over on the highway a couple miles from here. He helped her sandbag her well and move a few things out of the basement. Finally, they got back home. And then Ray went down to help move a piano for a neighbor who was out of town. In fact, our neighbors on both sides were out of town. In the meantime, my brother from Roberts called to see how things were going. Our neighbor, who lives in a trailer down past the next intersection, called from Burley. Their little dog was tied by their trailer, and they were worried because the dog might be drowned. So we told them we’d go down and take care of it, but we didn’t go down right then.

S: Now, after these preparations, did you go up to the hill, or where did you go when you finally left your home?

H: Well, we were going to go. Ray took the van to the service station for gas. Then he came back and decided that we would be okay here. He’s been in different places in the world where they have typhoons and tidal waves, and he felt that we’d get water, but we’d be okay. Our home is a basement built on top of the ground. And so we made the decision to stay home. Naughty, naughty, we should have gone, but we didn’t go. But at the last minute, as we saw the water at the intersection of 88 and the Hibbard Road, Ray had us all get on top of the roof so we could see it better. He said, “This is something you won’t see again.” And so we got on top of the roof and we saw the power lines go, you know, like fireworks. We saw all these trailers and houses just moving down the river, and it looked like they were on wheels on the road. They were moving just at a nice clip, really fast, and it was a spectacular sight. First, we saw the water move from that area into the Widdison area, east of us. We saw it moving, and the children said, “Mom, go get the little doggie.”

So that is when I went to get the dog. I went in our old Chevrolet to Ishino’s house and got the little dog. It was really a nervous little dog. I didn’t know what I was
going to do with it. I started to come back home, and I saw the debris and water coming across the road, from the east into our area. I decided I’d better not go through that. So I went back to the corner of the intersection, where Heinzes live and I just watched from there. I could see my family out on the deck, at the back of the house. Ray had brought Grandma from her house to our house, and so she was asleep at the time it started, but they decided to wake her up just in case the house did go so they could get her out. I watched for quite awhile and I saw my family trying to bail water out. We have a deck along the back, and I saw them carry buckets out and pour it over the deck. I was glad that I wasn’t at home so in case something did happen that they needed help, I could get help for them. I waited there for quite awhile. Mr. Hanami came by and I gave the dog to him.

When it looked like things were pretty stable here, I went around to 5th West and 7th South, where my sister lives, to see how she was doing. The road starts going up just past their house, so everybody was congregating there at the edge of the water, watching what was happening. While I was there, you could see the water receding just a little bit. Then we realized that the peak had passed. Some of the people waded back into their houses. I borrowed some binoculars and came around as far as I could get. I got back to Heinz’s corner. I saw Ray and Tomajean. Later I came back again to look. This time I noticed that it was pretty quiet; they had given up on all this bailing activity. I could only get as far as Kauer’s which was down the next mile, because the water still wasn’t at Heinz’s corner, it had filled in and spread out that way. I had to detour around to the south to get that far. That night Lucky and I slept at Cole’s, a neighbor up on the hill. We kept hearing these rumors about backlash from the butte and that the rest of the dam had gone, just funny things that made you worry. So I borrowed a radio, and I played it all night so that in case things happened again, I could get busy and get some help to my family. As soon as it started to get a little bit light, I got up. The water had receded that I could get in just fine. I parked the car at the corner though because there was a big gully in the road so that I couldn’t really drive on in. Then I walked on down our road.

S: When you first saw the water, when you were up on the roof, what did it look like?

H: Well, it just looked like a river, just muddy and with the houses being carried along. We watched Keith Siepert’s home, a brick home, and it just disintegrated before our eyes, just disappeared.

S: What did you feel like as you watched that, did you ever feel at any point that it was all hopeless, or despair, or anything?

H: You just didn’t have time to really think about it. It happened so fast.

S: Did you see any animals trying to escape the flood?

H: A few dead animals floated by and our neighbors’ animals were on the canal bank. Then afterward there were dead animals all over the place.
S: When you first came back to your house that morning, and came inside and saw what happened, what did you see, what sort of things happened?

H: The water got up about three feet on the ground floor. Of course, all the carpets and things were just covered with mud. The water in our house didn’t have to be bailed out because the house is built from ground level up and it just rolled back out as the water receded. Well, everything had just floated around and then sat back down again. We hadn’t moved things up quite high enough. We had put lots of books on the ping pong table but the water got up above the top of the table, so they were wet and muddy. It just looked like a lot of work. It was a mess. Basically, we still had our living area upstairs, so we just stayed there, because we had food in the fridge that was going to get rotten if it wasn’t used, and we had plenty of water and food to take care of ourselves. We just stayed here and started working. We used our hibachi and our Coleman stove, and cooked our own meals outdoors. We just camped at home. It worked out fine.

S: Now as you began the cleaning up process did you have any volunteer help? Or was it just mostly family?

H: Well, at first it was just our family, my husband and I and our three daughters. Raelyn, is the youngest, she was fourteen at that time. We used snow shovels and things and scraped the mud off and put it into buckets, carried the buckets out and poured them off the deck. That deck was a tremendous blessing, because it floated in the flood and then it went back down again. But it was up enough so that we weren’t working in mud. We poured the mud off the edge of it and still had a place to walk. We proceeded to get the carpets out, and I didn’t think we could do it by ourselves, because they are so heavy when they are filled with water. But we scraped off as much mud as we could. And my husband fixed an A-frame type thing to hang them on. He rigged up some cross boards to help us carry them, because they were just too heavy. With these boards to hang onto, we did manage to get all those carpets out. We hung them over these things, and after we got the water back again, I think it was Tuesday when the power was turned on again, we were able to get the well going. And then we tried to hose the mud out. After we got those carpets out, we just kind of squished the water and mud along with the snow shovels. But I would say that for two days or so we were just shoveling out mud.

S: How much were you able to salvage, or did you have to throw them away in the end?

H: We haven’t replaced everything yet. We had two different kinds of carpet, there was a plain orange on the end by the fireplace, and it faded and shrank. The other had a propylene back and it doesn’t look too bad, we haven’t actually thrown it away yet, but we don’t really dare use it either. I am not sure. The books were ruined, and we just threw out and burned a lot of things. We had a bed in the one area. We burned the mattress. Mainly it just floated on top, but it is something that you don’t think you want to use again.

S: Was there any one thing that you lost down there that was irreplaceable, that you felt particularly bad about, or anything that you lost that was the hardest?
H: I had my family pictures, but somehow or other I thought they were okay and I really didn’t check on them until we started working through all the stuff in the garage. Ray and the girls had carried the things out so that we could get the carpets out. And then when I came across those, as I was working through the things, they were already ruined. I think if I had thought about them right at the first, that maybe I could have saved some of them. And the other thing was a stereo with speaker cabinets that my husband had had made in Japan and it was pretty well ruined, it had floated over, tipped over on its front, and all the components that were in it were ruined. I guess we can have it refinished but we wished we had moved that upstairs.

S: Did you have any dealings with any agencies, such as the Red Cross, LDS church and government, prior, of course, to your claim settlement? How would you assess their functioning at this time? Did you think that these organizations were effective?

H: I thought they just did a tremendous job. Actually our bishop came, and the leaders came around to check to see if we were okay and see what our needs were. At first we didn’t check with the Red Cross, but then we got some cleaning equipment. In fact, they came around when they were about ready to finish up and offered us brooms and things like that which were helpful. Buckets, you could use all kinds of buckets. Our ward had meetings to help us and keep us informed.

S: When you filed your claim with the BOR, were you satisfied with the settlement that you made?

H: I think they were fair. Just one thing that we were just a little disappointed about. We had several older cars that we weren’t actually using and I guess that was the reason why they cut that off. We could have fought it, but we didn’t. The license had just expired on one car the end of May. We weren’t using it all the time, just once in a while. The license had just expired. If the car license wasn’t current, then apparently it was just too bad.

S: As you watched the community of Rexburg and the surrounding area recover over the last year, what sort of things do you think have happened, positive things and what sort of negative things have happened?

H: I am sure that there are many areas of our city that are improved? Where homes have been demolished and a new one is in its place, that’s pretty nice. But the thing that I have noticed most is the older people. It is so hard, it’s a more traumatic thing for them. I know with my mom, she was living in her home, but there were cracks and things, and we don’t know if we should finish doing the rest of the repairs on it or what. It looks like it is settling and there could be some additional problems. But I’ve noticed that with other old people that it has been a real hard thing for them, losing all their keepsakes and everything that they have been treasuring all these years and then having to go through the problem of getting into a new home or getting something else to live in. It has been
really hard for them. Most people, I’d say, have come through it in pretty good shape. Actually they are better off than they were before.

S: Do you think that it has affected the attitude that the people have towards each other as a community, maybe more sense of community than they were before?

H: I think people have rallied around each other getting help. The many volunteers that came in were really tremendous. We did have some volunteers help after a week or so, some people from Jerome, and Carey, Idaho one day. They had gotten down to a point where they didn’t have people who were in as dire circumstances and so they sent them out here. They helped us that day to get the basement floor cleaned out. Of course, we had already shoveled out the worst, but they helped us and that was nice. We really appreciated that and I thought that was a great boost in getting our community back in shape. There was a point when you were just worn out and tired and just a little bit discouraged and here they came and gave the boost that you needed to carry on. And it was really great.

S: There has been some talk as the construction has gone on in the last year that a lot of contractors and sub-contractors came in form the outside and took advantage of the situation. Do you know of any instances?

H: Yes, I do. A lady that my husband home teaches, apparently she signed with this one contractor and his price was exorbitant, and she found somebody that would do it for half price, and so she had the other person do it. The first contractor was going to sue her. I think it all turned out okay. It was just like they were trying to get the biggest possible price they could.

S: You mentioned the impact of the flood on the elderly people and, having three teenagers, I was wondering if you were aware of the impact on the younger people, if you have noticed anything, perhaps any special way that it has affected them?

H: One thing that I have noticed specifically with our children, they pitched right in and really worked hard. You know, in regular times you ask them to do something and they say, “Oh, oh,” but there was no problem. They just pitched right in and worked hard.

S: Raelyn, how have you felt? Do you think there have been any problems for you and your friends. Have you felt that it has been hard for you? Or has it gone on just pretty much the same?

R: The same.

S: Do you feel like it is something that is sort of behind you?

R: Good experience, but I’m glad it is over.
S: As you have probably heard, there is talk now about the dam being rebuilt. Are you in favor of this, and if so, are you in favor of it being rebuilt in the same location?

H: I really feel that we need it for irrigation purposes and for flood control also. Some springs when there is a huge runoff, of course, there is no problem with that this spring, they do have flood conditions and I feel like they need it. I’d surely want them to do a better engineering job than they did last time. But there is no reason why they shouldn’t do it and make it safe. There shouldn’t be any head in the sand bit another time. I think it would probably be fine.

S: there has been some talk about people filing some fraudulent claims, and without mentioning any names, have you been aware of any people who have filed fraudulent claims?

H: No, not at all. I think for the most part, people have been conservative. The fact that they were getting replacement value on their things was really quite different than just getting the value of the thing at the time, because it was used. You see, the value would be quite different if you went to sell it than if you got the replacement cost of it. I don’t think anyone can complain about that. I think many people that I’ve talked to, there were some things that they didn’t’ bother to claim. They felt that they maybe weren’t really worth that much.

S: There has been talk also about that cause of the dam breaking. Most people think that if was due to just man-made failure and some people have expressed the thought that it was an act of divine retribution. How do you feel about that?

H: One thing that struck me, the fact that the dam filled so quickly, I have wondered if it had filled at the rate that they had anticipated, like two years time, at least it probably wouldn’t have gone as soon. To me, that seems like the key factor, the fact that it filled so quickly, it didn’t five the dam a chance. There was a weakness there, but maybe if it filled more slowly, and the spillway had been in operation, maybe there wouldn’t have been a flood.

S: Iris, as you look back over the past year and the experiences that you and your family have undergone, what if any, impact has it had on you personally on your own values or attitudes, or maybe even your personality, or perhaps your relationships with the family?

H: I think it has made our family closer. Well, material tings aren’t really that important. They can go very quickly, and we shouldn’t put such an importance on material possessions. We should be aware and strive to build our relationships with each other and with our friends and neighbors and not worry about other things.

S: Well, I don’t’ have any more specific questions. Is there anything that you would like to add?

H: No, not particularly.
S: Thank you, Mrs. Hoglund.