The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Janelle Fowler – Life during the Teton Flood

By Janelle Fowler

February 15, 2004

Box 6 Folder 10

Oral Interview conducted by Nita Edelmayer

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin       June 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
This is an oral history. I am Nita Elelmayer. Today, April 12, 1977, I am going to interview Janelle Fowler. The general topic will be the Teton Dam Flood. Mrs. Fowler was born in Rigby, Idaho. She has lived in Sugar City for about six years. Her father (Clint Jensen) was born in the Green Canyon area. Her mother (Maxine Hill Jensen) was born near Idaho Falls, Idaho. Mrs. Fowler is a housewife.

Mrs. Fowler’s comments on the Teton Dam Flood:

JF: June 5, 1976, was a gorgeous day. It had been kind of stormy all week long, but Saturday, June 5, was just gorgeous and we were going to go camping with our three children. I took the youngest daughter and went into Rexburg to get some groceries. While we were in the grocery store we heard over the intercom that the dam had broken and anyone living along the river—would they evacuate. Well, that didn’t sound too serious, so we stayed there and finished buying our groceries. When we went outside there were police sirens all over the place, screaming back and forth. So we decided maybe it was a little more serious than it sounded. We had left my husband and one son at home without a car so we decided we’d better hurry home and pick them up, get them out of the area. When we got to the bridge in Rexburg they had a barricade there and the policemen wouldn’t let anyone back through. So being my cool self I panicked. There’s a CAL Ranch right near the bridge, so I went in to call my husband and couldn’t get him on the telephone at all. Then I really panicked. And then I went over to his sister’s (Bonnie Edelmayer) house that lives in Rexburg and she told me that she had called him. So then I calmed just a little. They sent out word on the radio that the water was going to get to Main Street in Rexburg, so they wanted everyone to evacuate to the hill. We went over to my mother’s house and gathered up some blankets and things in case we had to spend the evening out in the wilds. After we all got up onto the hill my husband and son finally came in on his brother’s (Dale Fowler) motorcycle, which he had borrowed, which was all the provisions we came out with. Everything else was left in our house. There were already a lot of people up on the hill and it was quite hard to find parking space. We found one up the hill a little ways where we could see the valley below. I could see my house over in Sugar.

It was about a half an hour before we could see the water coming down the valley. It looked like a big gray cloud engulfing everything that got in its path until it got down to within about five miles of Sugar. Then you could see a few treetops and once in a while a house top or a barn would be left standing above the water. We had a spy-glass in one of the vehicles so we kept checking on Sugar City every now and then to make sure things were cool. I watched as the water came over the top of the road of my house and just then it kind of settled down to where you could see the front room window. It was still standing there which was not like a lot of houses that floated by. There was one barn that floated by with a couple of horses on top of it—they were panicky. We watched them float around. There was tin buildings; animals running in front of the water.

We watched the water enter Rexburg and all the animals running in front. We went down to Don’s sister’s house just in time to see another house float into it and hit the trees. It was quite an experience. The water went through at—I would guess—at 10 miles an hour, about 5 feet high in the middle of town. After we watched the water going
through for awhile and the animals and all the debris, it began to become evening, so we
decided to go over to Rigby where my husband’s other brother (Vern Fowler) lives. So
three families of us packed up and went over and said “Surprise, we’re here!” And he got
out his tents and fixed up a little tent city out on the lawn for all the kids—which were
many between the three families.

The next day we had come into Rexburg, the water had gone down quite a bit—
there was still puddles there. My father and mother had gone into Wyoming for the
weekend to baptize my niece and they didn’t know so far whether everyone was okay or
not because telephone connections had gone bad. Nobody could get any telephone calls
through to Rexburg. We caught up with them about two o’clock that afternoon and he
said that they had gone on a picnic Saturday after he had baptized my niece. He got this
strange feeling that came over him that something was the matter with his family. So he
went out into an area that was quite secluded and he prayed everything would be okay
with his family that no harm would come to them. After about ten minutes he calmed
down and decided that things were going to be okay. That evening they heard over the
radio that the dam had burst. His house didn’t look terrific either. Every house had
mud—you couldn’t hardly even walk through it—it was gooshy, and straw and debris
and dead animals and logs—it was just a total mess.

We decided to go over to Don’s sister’s house there in Rexburg and start cleaning
it out and seeing what we could find that was worth saving. First when we walked in—
well, we had to push the door open, the fridge and everything was in front of it, and straw
and mud mixed together. You couldn’t get into any of the bedrooms or anything because
things were blocking the door. We had to search with our fingers through the mud to find
necklaces and little knick-knacks and the drawers had tipped over and mud was in
everything. We spent the day just basically getting things out of the mud in this home.
That evening after we went back to Rigby, we called down to Burley where Don’s
mother lives. She had taken our oldest daughter down there to stay with her, and they
were both in just a real panic because the radio and television and news media made
everything sound about three times as bad as it was to us up here that could see it. They
sent a report over the radio that Sugar City was just no more which is where we live and
my daughter was just about in hysterics. All she could do was just cry when we called
her. I can imagine the helpless feeling that they must have had. We watched the flood
again that evening on the same news and it was just about as bad as the first time we’d
watched it in real. We spent the next couple of weeks cleaning out mud from the
different homes of our relatives and friends. They all basically the same. All the good
things that they had cherished were ruined. But all the fortunate things like the lives were
spared. There were very few deaths and nobody I knew personally was killed. On
Monday my husband and his brother Dale came to Sugar City on motorcycles. No
vehicles could get through yet because the roads were in such bad condition. They came
around the back way and got to our house and got a few things out. I thought it was
cute—my husband got some clothes for everyone and then he gathered up my jewelry
and make-up. I guess he figured I couldn’t do without it, but it was quite thoughtful of
him I thought. They came back with the report that our house wasn’t damaged too
greatly. We have a split level house and the upstairs portion wasn’t injured. The
basement and the main floor had mud all over as we saw when we came back on
Monday. We were able to get through in our four wheel drive vehicle and able to get
through to our house. All our family and friends came over and helped shovel out the mud and clean it up a little. Our garage was dented in quite bad. Our playhouse—a shed like building—had crashed into it and it needed to have the whole end replaced. The roof of our house had sunk down on that end. We had sliding glass doors in the rear of our home which had logs all the way up to it but the doors hadn’t been broken. In fact only one window had been broken in our home and that was in the downstairs. Downstairs we had a big nine by twelve braided oval rug which we never did find. We started following the trail of our belongings that were downstairs and that had floated out. It led down to our neighbors. They have a big row of trees back around of their house—kind of surrounding their house—and they caught just everything I think from Teton all the way down here. We found a real nice cedar chest—it was clear full of blankets and quilts and things a young lady had spent a lot of time making. There was a camper trailer—a pull-type camper trailer—down there and we had one of our nephews go into the camper trailer to make sure there were no bodies in the camper and he said it was in really good condition—it must have floated, therefore not getting the water into spoil everything. We spent the next few days at our house washing things out. The water went down Tuesday so it wasn’t flowing like a river past our house. And then again on Wednesday it had been flooded again because the government people in charge of the water had tried to bypass the main highway and had channeled the water down by our house. Therefore our house had been flooded again. That was a little bit discouraging. But then a couple of days later we had been flooded again, which was highly discouraging, because of the fire hydrant which sits by our home and had burst and the water was coming out of it, and we were again flooded. After the first initial flood I guess there’s not too much more damage that can be done, but it was kind of discouraging to see your house under water that many different times, when it really wasn’t necessary. With the water going through your yard it was going at quite a rapid pace and it kind of channeled through the road right in front of our house. It was quite a deep whole and it was quite fun to watch the cars come through trying to get through this piece in the road. Because most cars couldn’t make it if they weren’t a four wheel drive they would drop right down in and couldn’t get back out.

The different agencies that came in to help were quite remarkable. From Sunday on for two months they furnished your dinner and your evening meal. There was one place situated at Ricks College were you could go and get your meals and then another over here in Sugar at the high school. They had ladies there that would fix the meal and have it all ready. All you had to do was go up there—they had clean sterile water where you could wash your hands and then pick up your food and either eat it there or bring it back to wherever you were working. I don’t think there was anyone that went hungry—if there was they shouldn’t have. My sister-in-law spent a few days up at the college in their gym down at the bottom floor where the government had set up many different agencies to help the people—one being the Red Cross and the VA and the HUD Department and all different types of special agencies to help the people. We had to wait in long lines for hours and hours and hours to get the different agencies that we were eligible for—one of them being HUD and one of them being Red Cross. The Red Cross stepped in and paid money out to people who had lost their belongings, or clothes or blankets or such things that they could set up housekeeping again which was really great. And of course HUD gave us trailers to live in so that we wouldn’t be out in the cold.
And another was the food program. They gave everyone that was in the flood some food stamps that they could go buy some food that they wouldn’t be hungry. And also the Relief Society of the Mormon Church set up special food programs where you could go and get food and also set up centers where you could go and get clothes that had been sent in from all over the world. They had sent money or clothes or whatever to help the families here. It was just miraculous to see the people and different agencies that helped. And the church organized their people to come and help clean out the homes and then later when the mud was cleaned out they had specialists like electricians and carpenters and people come in. The electricians of course would help you with your wiring and the carpenters would give you bids on how much it would cost to replace it or to rebuild—whichever the case may be. On one occasion my sister-in-law and some of our children and I went up to St. Anthony to one of their special places they had designated for free clothing and such things. We found just magnificent clothes and shoes and blankets, just whatever—just everything you would really need—small appliances. We found about seven squirt guns which we decided would be all right and we decided we would take a few of these. We stuffed them all into the trunk in her car and came back to my house in Sugar City. We had taken the carpet out of the house and had it laying on our front yard in the mud up on boards and it was quite a nice little place to sit in the sun and enjoy. So we sat there and divided what we had gathered and we came to the squirt guns and it was such a hot day and if you can imagine five grown people having a squirt gun fight in the middle of July on a hot day in the front yard with mud all over and people going by and thinking you were absolutely bananas. But it sure felt nice and it kind of helped relieve the tension.

As I said before we were living in Rigby with Don’s brother—about three families of us and there were numerous children there and remarkably they got along quite well. I didn’t have any arguing or quarreling at all. It was quite unique in the mornings with only one bathroom and all these children and grown-ups in the same house trying to get their morning duties done. Sometimes some of the children would stay at Burley with their Grandmother (Mrs. Harold Fowler) and sometimes they would all be living in Rigby. In about the first part of July we got the opportunity to move to Ashton and live in a camper trailer—the type that you pull behind a car. We decided that this would be better than everyone living in this one home in Rigby. So we spent the month of July in Ashton living in the camper trailer. The College had housing facilities for most of the flood victims. But at this late day they were reluctant to let you use the apartment because the college people would be coming back and they weren’t sure when the HUD trailers would be in, in time. So the month of July we spent driving about thirty-five miles driving down to Sugar to work on our home and then driving back the thirty-five miles to our camp trailer, which was better than nothing—it was sure small which would sleep four which was pretty good for our family—we have three children and then my husband and I. We worked on our house by ourselves because carpenters were so hard to find. They were all so busy working on other people’s homes. We decided to do it ourselves. We did the wiring and the carpentry ourselves. We’ve had no experiences in this whatsoever so it was really quite a unique thing.

One hot summer day we were out—we had built the side of our garage back up. We were out putting siding up on it, up on the ladders, and the demolition team came in and demolished the house that was right next to us. So we took a breather to watch this
amazing feat. The cats would climb right up on the houses and then the front end would smash down and break the house to bits. Many of the homes had all kinds of garbage in them like washers and dryers and stoves and things that were not salvageable—they would just leave them in there and then everything would be taken out with the demolition team. And the same day they came to demolish Don’s mother’s little house which was right next to ours—which was not salvageable. It was a couple of kids and they were just having a ball. They didn’t know exactly how to run cats and they didn’t know exactly what they were doing. It was just really a funny experience. They couldn’t figure out how to get the roof off the top of the house without it falling on top of them. They’d drive their cars up there—it would start coming and spook them and they’d push it back up to where it was and they’d try it again. They were laughing and having a good time. It really helped to relieve the tension here too.

We had quite a lot of work to do on the main floor of our home. We had to jack up our roof and put the walls back in, and make sure they got even. For two people who had never done carpentry work in their lives this was unique, and different and challenging. We had to cut all the walls out of our main floor so that everything would dry. And we took up all the floors—we had a crawl space underneath that had garbage all over in it, which was quite a fun time digging all that out of there. It had insulation which was quite hard to get out. And I was reluctant to get down in the crawl space while they were taking the floorboards out and it wasn’t too bad until this one time they were taking out a floorboard and it slipped and just about knocked me in the had and scared me to death and everybody else that was around too. But we had brushes and brooms and mops and buckets and soap and everything that was donated by the Red Cross to help make this clean up easier. Also down in our basement portion of our house we had to take the walls out and scrub the mud. It was quite unique getting a sub pump over here to clean out the basement part. I learned what really hard work is, lifting that mud up to the basement window to throw it out the windows. After we got all the mud and debris out of our home and the walls and the floors up we had to let it dry for awhile before we could start rebuilding.

So we took this opportunity to take our three children out camping in the dirt to get away from the mud. We all love camping. We spent about a week out camping and then came back and the first thing we did was start to replace the wiring and the electrical outlets. My husband took charge of this program where I know nothing about electricity at all. Within a day or so he had all the electrical outlets replaced. Then we started hauling sheet rock which is heavier than the dickens, and putting it up on the walls and plastering and all the usual things that has to be done to a home. We got a lot of help from his family. His brothers came over very often and helped with a lot of heavy work.

Our ward at church had meetings every morning, starting about three days after the flood to let the people know what was going on, and to let the people know what they could do and couldn’t do regarding their homes and the flood and what help was available. It was really a remarkable thing to me to see the church work and the Relief Society program. At one of these meetings they told us we couldn’t put our trailers on our private properties because our water and sewer lines in Sugar were damaged too bad and they had to be replaced, because it was contaminated. So they built two HUD trailer parks here in Sugar and one great big one over in Rexburg to accommodate the people that lived within the city limits. We were fortunate to get our HUD trailer in the north
side mobile village in Sugar. About the last week in July my mother that lives in Rexburg got her trailer and she was able to put it on her property. It was really a nice trailer. It had carpeting—one of the very few HUD trailers that was actually worth looking at. And I thought well, this isn’t too bad. Ours came in the next week and needless to say I was disappointed. However, it does beat a tent. It was only temporary. Most of the trailer houses that I went into that were HUD Mobil homes looked basically the same as ours did. I don’t know how my mother rated. I guess she’s one of the privileged few.

We lived in our mobile village from August (1976) up until April (1977), we just have been living in our home for only a few short weeks and it really seems nice.

After rebuilding the lower portion of our home, we decided we had enough ability to rebuild some of our furniture. We built a dining room table and chair set which turned out quite nice. My husband bought me a china cupboard that I refinished, so this experience has really helped us grow.

In a way I think this flood had been a blessing to us. Before, I took—myself, anyway—I took everything for granted and I figured that everything was here—it was going to be here forever. And also it brought us closer to our families and closer to the Lord, knowing how really small we are and even our lives can be taken away from us without any notice. At least with this flood we had enough notice to save our lives. Belongings, earthly belongings, you can replace but lives you cannot.

I believe the Teton Dam should be rebuilt. They need a way to control the water. I’m not sure that I would feel safe having it rebuilt. Maybe if they rebuilt it in a different place or some different sort of structure. I’m not really sure, but I do feel they need a dam in this area.