JM: This is an oral history. I am Janet Meyer. Today is March 24, 1977. I am going to interview John Galbraith. The general topic will be the Teton Dam Disaster. Mr. Galbraith, would you please spell your name?


JM: Where were you born?

JG: Lethridge, Alberta Canada.

JM: How long have you lived in Sugar City?

JG: I have been in Rexburg a total of nine years. I have been in Sugar a total of three years.

JM: Where were your parents born?

JG: They’re Canadians, born in Canada.

JM: What is your occupation?

JG: I teach French here at Ricks College.

JM: Okay. I will start the interview now. What were your thoughts while the dam was being built, did you ever think it would go out?

JG: I didn’t think the dam would go out and didn’t know any one who did. Never did talk to anyone who did. There were environmentalists who were concerned about the building of the dam, because how it would influence the fishing rights, the fishing, and the wildlife along the banks of the river, but there was never an issue of the dam going out. I had been out to the dam many times watching its progress and was basically in favor of the project.

JM: How did you find out the dam had broke?

JG: At the time, I was over in England coming home form a tour of Israel with a group of people, one of whom was Inez Searle who is on campus also, Sister Searle, Dean of Women. It was four o’clock Sunday morning; I was awake from my sleep in the hotel in London with a phone call from Sister Searle, who was in our group. Her son had reached her, I think, from Provo. He didn’t have any definite particulars on the disaster, but only knew what he had heard form television and radio and relayed to us in England those facts, which were very skimpy, were all we knew. Our first report was the Teton Dam had broken and Sugar City was wiped out, St. Anthony they said was wiped out, and we don’t know the extent of the damage or the amount of loss of life. So that is the only information we had at the very beginning.
JM: How long was it before you got back here?

JG: I had some very anxious hours the rest of that morning, of course and all day Sunday and it was Monday morning before we caught our flight, and flew back to Calgary Alberta, where we were able to get all the information we desired. ‘Til then we did not know what was right or wrong. It was in all the papers and on the television and in the London Times, the picture of Sugar City. It was hard for me to get the little, tiny town that I had come from was in the front lines of all the papers, on television and radio that in fact was so.

JM: You mean it even hit European news?

JG: Oh, I should say. Like I say, it had a picture of Sugar City on the front page of the paper.

JM: What day was it when you got back here to this area?

JG: I did not get back here ‘til Wednesday morning. I arrived in Calgary Monday afternoon. When I got to Calgary, my wife and family who had been in the flood disaster area had traveled all the way up to Canada because they really didn’t have anywhere to go and our parents live up there, our families. So she did the most logical things she could think of, throw the kids in the car, borrow some money from a friend and travel up to Canada knowing I would land there Monday afternoon. So she was there at the airport to greet me when I was there, I had no intentions of meeting her there, but there she was, and of course she could give us all the first hand information. Then together we billeted out our eight children. Together we drove back here and got here Wednesday afternoon.

JM: What were your thoughts when you had found the dam had gone out and your family was still in the area?

JG: Are you referring to when I was still in England?

JM: Yes.

JG: Of course, I don’t really think anyone can appreciate those thoughts unless they have been through a similar kind of experience. It was a very interesting feeling. When Sister Searle first mentioned the dam had broken, and she hated to tell me that Sugar City was wiped out, instantly, I thought of my wife and children and wonder if I had any. Then, to compound that problem I thought of all my friends that lived right there in the same block and realized that if my family was gone they too were gone. It was a very empty feeling. I didn’t cry, didn’t weep. I was just overwhelmed at the feasibility, that in one fell swoop that my wife, children, and all my friends lives were in a very real since, very possible, snuffed out, and that I would go home to essentially nothing, no close friends, no wife, no children, no home, no vehicles, nothing. Those were some anxious moments in my mind. I spent four of five hours trying to find out anybody who could give me any kind of information over the telephone, of course it was early in the morning and no one could.
We tried to call into the flood zone area and all the lines were down and that was an impossibility to get a hold of anyone. I tried to call my family in Canada, knowing that they would be somewhat more aware than I was and couldn’t get anyone on the telephone. We next tried to call the embassy, the American and Canadian embassies in England. Then we tried to call the newspapers, major newspapers who might know something, none of who could give us anymore information than that general statement that I had received from Sister Searle that the dam in fact had broken, there was major damage. We did get the report, it looked like that death was minimal but the reports were so mixed up that no one knew for sure. Those were very frustrating moments for me. I remember kneeling down and talking to the Lord about the problem and did get a good feeling in my heart. It’s hard to interpret what those good feelings mean. Does it mean all will be well? Does it mean [that] in fact that your wife and family are okay? What does those good feelings mean in your heart? I knew I had them, and I felt at ease basically about the whole situation, but I wasn’t sure still and I didn’t have any questions answered. It was [not] ‘til Monday afternoon, and a day and a half later, did I get those questions answered.

JM: Could you describe what your wife did when she found the dam had broke?

JG: Yes. She was home, and it was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. She was making sandwiches for my two oldest boys, one Kimball who is eleven years old and Kevin who is nine. They were going fishing with their friends the Browns next door. They were going fishing on the Teton Dam or going fishing on the river. Interesting enough the lawn mower had broken down. They knew dad was coming home right away, and they knew they had to have the lawn all fixed up, and our electric lawn mower had broken down, and they had to mow the lawn by hand. Otherwise, they would have been gone a couple hours before the signal came out. She was finishing up their lunch so they could go, and they were waiting for mom to finish it when Brother Black our next door neighbor drove up in a frenzy saying, “The dam has broken, grab anything you can and get out fast, it should be here any minute.” Of course before she grabbed her own belongings, she told the kids to grab anything you can and jump in the car. She went next door and warned neighbors. So she ran over to Gages and across the road to Browns warning them and telling them to warn neighbors, telling everyone to get out. Then she ran home, grabbing the few little things for the baby, jumped in the car. She went next door and warned neighbors. So she ran over to Gages and across the road to Browns warning them and telling them to warn neighbors, telling everyone to get out. Then she ran home, grabbing the few little things for the baby, jumped in the car. Our neighbors were waiting in our driveway for her to leave. They weren’t going to leave ‘til they knew she was with them, ‘cause they knew I was not home. Of course everyone was upset, anxious and worried. She drove down the road trying to get on the highway. There was a long line of traffic, they kept watching behind them to see if the water was going to come before they got out of Sugar City. Of course what they did now know was they probably had an hour’s time, but no one knew that, for all they knew that wall of water would be upon them. Someone in town mentioned how some people thought it would be only three or four inches or even miss Sugar City. My wife’s feelings were, I don’t believe that, I believe it’s going to be a wall of water. And in her mind she had pictured it to be as devastating as it turned out to be. They finally got up on Ricks College campus and stayed with Mary Caroline Pugmire, a friend up on the hill. It was from that vantage point they watched the wall of water come. It was observable, they could watch it as it
went through Sugar City, kept coming towards Rexburg. She could see property of friends, homes of friends, and she say, “Oh there goes so and so’s home.” They watched the wall, and cattle running before it. They would hit a fence, and water would catch up and take them away. She said it was a terrifying experience to watch all that go on. Before long it was all over. Rather than go back into Sugar City, it was impossible. She piled all the kids in the car and went up to Canada.

JM: When did you [see] home, what was left of home?

JG: When we arrived in town, of course my wife and I were alone, and we went and through some back lanes to get to Sugar City. We found the people, they weren’t hysterical, they weren’t crying, they were quiet. People were walking around; it was a beautiful, warm day. The water had subsided, there were pools around; they were essentially dry. They were still walking around looking for things that belonged to them when the path of the water. They said hello, they just lost their luster. It was a very interesting feeling. We looked at our home; it had been bashed in. The living room was gone, all the walls were gone, the second floor was hanging over the living room. The garage had been wiped off. I guess Brother Blacks house had crashed into our garage taking it off. We never found any of the belongings in our home that had been swept away in the flood, our piano, our couches and chairs, anything like it. Our refrigerator had been sucked out of the kitchen and taken away. The whole lower floor of our two-story home had been completely gutted and bashed in. The second floor looked a little more presentable, however there were holes where telephone poles, fifteen to twenty feet high had smashed into the sides of the walls and left big gaping holes even in the second floor. It was awe. As much as our surrounding of our particular home, it just, no matter how I tried in the last two or three days prior to getting there, tried to imagine the destruction it would be, it was infinitely worse than anything I had conjured up. It just seemed as though nothing could be that devastating. And to see big mammoth buildings that weren’t even there, couldn’t even be found. To see the rail way tracks just ripped and snarled out in the fields, cars, we found our truck a half a mile away; it had been parked in the garage. To just see the total destruction in reality, was more that in my mind had been able to picture.

JM: What was the first thing you did?

JG: We walked around the house tried to get an idea of where to start. I decided I had better get a couple of telephone poles laying round and get them sawed off and try to buy up that second floor hanging over the nothing what used to be the living room. And so with the help of friends I did that. By that time that was all we could do that day. The next day I came out. There was a curfew in town; we could not stay in town very long. We went to an early morning meeting and then went back. I was walking around in the mud when someone said, “Say, you could go over to the school and get some Red Cross boots because, rather than dirtying up your shoes.” I thought might as well go get some Red Cross boots because I have to do a lot of work around here. I went over to the Sugar City School to get a pair of Red Cross boots, and they were out of them. And I remember walking around all that afternoon, tippy toeing around thinking I couldn’t really get my
feet dirty ‘til I got my Red Cross boots when all the sudden it dawned on my mind that nobody owes me anything. The Red Cross doesn’t owe me a dime, no one does, and I better not stand around here waiting for Red Cross boots. I had not been intentionally been waiting around, but it just happened that way. All of the sudden, I realized that I’ve got to pitch in. And so I got my feet muddy and plunged into it. We had a foot and a half of mud all over the lower floor of that two-story home. There were big logs piled up one corner of the house. A fence and telephone wire running through what would have been the living room. It was just total chaos. The deep freeze was tipped over and the meat was rotting, doors were jammed, and couldn’t get in, and our property. We just walked around all day long trying to find a place to begin, only to pull and tug at something, and it wouldn’t give, so we would go someplace else trying to begin there. There was no beginning place. It was so overwhelming mammoth, and then we didn’t know what to do. Will the house come down? Will it stay? What is the thing that will happen? That indecision. We walked around for over a day and a half trying to decide where to start and what to do. I remember that next morning, two truck pulled up. They were member of the church from Ucon area. They walked up to me and said, “Do you live here?” And I said, “Yeah, I did.” He said, “We’re assigned to you, what can we do to help you out?” And I said, “I don’t know, I don’t know where to begin.” To which he replied, “Then get out of our way.” And they went to work. Watching them work gave us a new fire for the deed. And before I knew it, they had chain saws and they were cutting out that log jamb at the corner of the house and pulling it out with a four wheel drive. Two women had walked up stairs and taken off their shoes to keep things as clean as they could. They started sacking up what valuables we had upstairs that hadn’t been damaged by the flood, to get them out of the house. All of a sudden we took fresh courage and began working with them. The next day it was more of the same and the next day it was more of the same and everyday help came for us, just seemed to save our lives and give us courage to face a new day and work again. I don’t think we can ever be able to repay the help enough for the way they gave us fresh courage to face everyday and keep working. I had a brother-in-law come down from Canada. He was a RCMP. It was hard to get into the area because of the roads. They had sealed off the roads not letting people in unless they had just reason or had been invited in. But had had made a special effort to come all the way from Canada. He, for seven days pitched in and helped. Slowly we worked at tearing down sheet rock and tearing down the walls, cleaning up mud, tearing out carpets, tearing out floors, shoveling more mud, and the mammoth task took shape.

JM: Where was your family at during this time?

JG: My children were farmed out in Canada to many different families. We have a large family so they were farmed out as best as we could. My wife and I spent twelve and fourteen hours a day working on the house, helping neighbors and friends.

JM: Where did you and your wife live during this time?

JG: For a while we had a little camper that was my father’s that I had bought down with us. We stayed a couple of nights with friends, a few nights in that camper. It wasn’t ‘til a couple of months later that the HUD trailer came in and yet even before they came in
HUD was very willingly and helpfully able to find us an apartment, where we began living in the boys dorms. It was the chateau apartments and so we stayed, but that wasn’t even for a month later also. After a few weeks of working, my wife went up to Canada, and I just remained in a little trailer until HUD came through and found us accommodations so I could bring my children back down a my wife back down and we could live together at the boy’s dorms, ‘til the trailers rolled in or ‘til [we] found better accommodations.

JM: What did the church to do help the people?

JG: The church was a fantastic help. I think everyone realized how efficient the church was in moving in and getting supplies, helping us get organized. I think many people aren’t sure what was the church, what was the Red Cross, what was local, what had been donated by companies, foundations and other people. I noticed organization were very unselfish. To this day I am not really positive what was church and what was the Red Cross. I know that hundreds of wheel barrows, tools for cleaning up, soaps, gloves, boots, antiseptics and all that was brought in. Brooms, scrub brushes and I don’t know who the credit goes to. I think the church had a very large hand in that. I think the Red Cross was there trying to help with meals. I had the feeling that people weren’t sitting around and saying, “He, I want to get glory helping here. Notice me.” I think the church said there is a job to be done, and whoever gets the credit people need the help. And I think the Red Cross was saying the same thing. And I had the feeling like other people, I know so many goods come up to the college, and I don’t know if those people will ever get credit for the great generosity they gave. I wonder where all those truck loads of pop came and so much of the food came. And I have heard of companies sending down large quantities of food just to be of service. I don’t know if they will ever get credit or glory for it, but it meant a lot to us. We found ourselves eating out in Sugar City in poor accommodations, but the food tasted lovely. We found ourselves going out to the college, having hot meals. We felt so grateful to both church and other organizations for helping us out. I found, needing clothes and a few things and the bishop was more than willing. I was out of under garments, the bishop was more than willing to say you go up to the bishop’s store house and take anything and everything, they’re there to help. I felt hesitant to go up there because at the time we couldn’t reach funds necessary to pay for those goods, and I was assured that wasn’t the issue. You get the help now and later on in life you will have plenty of opportunities to pay back the services they’re doing for you now. We sure appreciated not only the church who played a major role but also many organizations.

JM: Can you tell what the general mood of the people was during this time? You mentioned how at first they were kind of quiet.

JG: If anything people were in fairly high spirits. They were still stunned by the whole thing, and that still showed on their faces. The most frustrating thing was meeting after meeting; we felt we were moving faster than government agencies were ready to move. That was frustrating to slow down and wait. When we were ready to move, ready to clean our homes out, but didn’t know whether or not we should. Do you
leave them 'til someone comes by and condemns them, where do you stay, what happens, does the house come down does it stay, what happens? It was a few days after big pumps had been brought in and pumped water out of basements and things like that, out of crawl spaces. It started sprinkling, and the Teton River was so plugged up with debris that it just flooded again and flooded many people’s homes and basements again. I remember how discouraging that was just a few days after the flood had come through to get that rain, and that really dampened spirits. But it didn’t last too long and was probably a blessing because it kept a lot of and infestations down. Probably the greatest conscious concern on the part of the people around and myself included, was this waiting around trying to find what in fact should be done. We would get one report, go ahead and start tearing down your walls and doing what you can and the next day no, don’t get in too big of a hurry to do that you might regret it later on. The next day was, go ahead, you can start stripping certain things out of your house, but the next day was, you better not yet we aren’t sure. We thought you could but maybe you can’t. This went on for days and days and days and days. There we all were champing at the bit, people had come into help and we weren’t sure what we should be doing to get that help. We could clean up basic debris, but what about those things that counted most? Do you let that water hang around, do you get an airing out, how much can you tear down? And finally in desperations many did what I finally did. We just said, “Look, we’re not waiting for the government agencies to tell us what to do. We’re just going to start cleaning up.” So we went in with big crow bars and started tearing our plaster, sheet rock, and hoped what we were doing was right. But we were tired of waiting, and we needed to wear off nervous energy. So we just lunged into it at full scale and hoped it would be right and turned out to be the proper thing. Generally speaking, in answer to you question again, spirits stayed very high. Probably unusually high for the kind of disaster it was. But still there were sad moments; there were moments when you would see people just wandering around our, in fields looking for precious things. Our meetings, we were very organized. The bishop had all the wards organized. We knew where to come and get help. The organization was great. It seemed that people worked hard so they didn’t have to think much and be sad. But I am sure there were times when doors were closed and tears were shed. And yet that was usually in private, in public we all tried to stay as brave as we could.

JM: You mentioned pride, did some of the people have a hard time excepting help? Did their pride step in the way?

JG: I think it was too mammoth of a job, and I think my feeling was everybody knew that we could see the mark of the flood ten years from now if we did not get help. I don’t know, but I think some people were bitter against what happened. Some people thought they could try to do it on their own, but for the most part people were grateful for the overwhelming help that was received, both locally and as far away as Salt Lake and other areas. We were grateful for it. And don’t think pride got in the way of too many people. It was too overwhelming of a task to let pride enter and pick away your own little problem. It just needed to be worked on together. Those people really saved our lives in that regard.
JM: Did the nation guard help do anything?

JG: I’m sure they did. We say lots of helicopters flying over constantly picking up dead animals and debris, cars and trucks later on. I’m sure that must have been under the direction of the National Guard, at least it looked like their helicopters. The police force was fantastic. You couldn’t get in or out without permission or the right credentials. I tried to move belongings over into another country, to a home of a friend and was turned back. At the time, I felt annoyed, but only realized that they were doing it for our best good to keep looting down and problems out. While some of that did go on it was kept to a minimal. And golly we appreciate the police, the National Guard, and those people who were organized to come in and help, did pay us a great service.

JM: Could you mention some of the rumors you heard, like when you were in England?

JG: There were no rumors in London. The only rumor was the dam has broken and there’s a major problem. There could be a lot of lives lost and there may not be. Now ‘til I got home, those were the only rumors I heard. When I got to Canada, the newspapers had some how received wind and my wife and family were there knowing they were flood victims. We had two or three reporters pounding on the door wanting to get pictures and the whole story, Canadian papers. And we were more than happy to give them all the information we knew or that my wife knew, how she saw the situation and that was put in the papers. We didn’t hear many rumors, ‘cause no one knew much. It wasn’t ‘til we got back and those weren’t rumors anymore because we could see with our own eyes.

JM: How did the children react to the situation?

JG: As I mentioned, I have eight children. I only have seven at the time of the flood, my wife was expecting. The children of course were all able to get out of the flood with my wife, get up on safe ground, and later on they were transported to Canada before they were able to see the devastation of the flood. Not that we were trying to keep them from it, it was the logical things to do at the time. Our oldest children, our nine and eleven year old boys probably had a better image of what had gone on. We tried to tell them that we really didn’t have a home anymore. That all our friends, their friends’ homes were gone, but no life was lost. We tried to explain it, and they probably got a vision of it. By the time they got back, much had been cleaned up. They were a month later getting back. So much that had been at the day of the flood had been cleaned up, but still there was so much to be done. I remember though our little boy Aaron who is just four years old. Somehow he had not pictured the problem, and being as young as he was we had failed to really to talk to him about it. I remember we drove back into Sugar City, he just couldn’t believe it. He was just sick about it all. As he would look around, he say, “Daddy look, daddy look!” We hadn’t warned him. When we walked into the bottom floor of our house, it was just stripped and there were no walls or anything else. Oh, he would say, “Daddy house broken.” He was just sick. And he just looked around and couldn’t believe it. He looked across the street over at Browns’ house, “Daddy Browns’ house it broken. Blacks’ house is gone.” Poor little kid, we had failed to warn him, and
he was just overwhelmed. It just made our hearts ache what he had come home to, without giving him some proper warning.

I think those are my main feelings. We never did get emotional or weepy about what had gone on, and friends were so willing to help us. We had friends and family who were willing to send thousands of dollars to help. True friends we hadn’t heard from for years who went, sent down money, cash contributions, food and clothing. People were so willing to give of their time and to give of their finances. I have a brother from Israel, who phoned me from Israel to find out how things were. He said, “John, you were here just a few weeks ago. We sat together on the mount of beatitudes and read the Sermon on the Mount and talked about where your treasure is that is where you heart is also.” And he said, “I want you to know that we support what you are doin’. We love you for the problem you are going through, and we are sending you our life’s earnings to help you out.” And that was a very touching experience to know that family and friends would sacrifice in our behalf so willingly. And I think we learned a great experience from it.

JM: Thank you.