The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

John Zirker – Life during the Teton Flood

By John Zirker

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Box 9 Folder 19

Oral Interview conducted by Kyle Winward

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
KW: I’m Kyle Winward. Today is April 15, 1977. I’m going to interview John Robert Zirker. The general topic will be the Teton Dam disaster. Where were you born?

JZ: Jackson Country, Mississippi.

KW: How long have you lived here?

JZ: Thirty years.

KW: Where were your parents born?

JZ: My mother was born in St. Anthony, Idaho, and my father was born in Layton, Utah.

KW: What is your occupation?

JZ: My profession is coach, professor, and farmer. The upset when the Teton Dam was first being discussed, there were many who were against the dam, I was for it. For the reasons it was built, we need more water and the Teton Dam was supposed to supply some 36,000 acres of dry farmland with needed water on the south side of the river, across the Rexburg bench and some ten to fifteen thousand acres of dry farmland on the north side of the river. That was one consideration, the other consideration was, I have lived here a number of years and I’ve seen floods that have damaged valuable crop land, and people’s properties next to the Teton River and I was aware of the problems that can arise very quickly with an uncontrolled river and the Teton Dam was supposed to alleviate some flood problems at least. I was in favor of it, number one, to irrigate more farm lands, and number two, to alleviate spring flooding conditions along the Teton. I was all in favor of it. I still feel that those conditions are still in force. We still need water for irrigation, we need to conserve that water in the spring, so that we can utilize it all year long, rather than let the flood run off in the spring, lose the water and be short of water in the dry farm area. The potential flood danger remains the same. I remember in 1962, when I was a senior in high school, we had storm conditions for about two weeks, put down fifteen to sixteen inches of snow, turned around and had a week of rain, and then a sudden Chinok wind came in. We had a flood. Simply that was large enough to create special problems. I wasn’t living down next to Smith Park, where I am now, but I went within a block of Smith Park, and in 1962 with two friends, put in a boat, and was able to go three miles up the river over what was normally farm land, and there was four feet of water underneath us, and I remember very well the conditions that can come about with sudden spring thaws and heavy snowfall. And that has to be uppermost in your mind when you’re thinking about living in an area and controlling spring flood waters. A dam would help, would help tremendously.

KW: When the dam was being built, did you ever think it might break?

JZ: The possibility of having the dam break was not really a big issue. The possibility of having leaks and of raising the water table in the Wilford area was talked about a lot, many of the engineers and people associated with the dam, well, I should say some of the
people associated with the dam, maintained that with the porous rock structure and with the number of faults found in the lava structure felt the dam would leak, however; I don’t remember hearing anyone maintain that there was a possibility the dam would fail and collapse completely. There was speculation as to how it would affect the area below the dam. Say if the Wilford area feeling that it would bring the water table and make many of those lands that were already marginal in having ground water so close to the surface and actual swamps in some places. They maintain that some of those would no longer even be marginal, that they would become swamp grounds. But as far as speculation as to whether the dam could break, I was never aware of anyone maintaining that the dam would fail.

KW: How did you hear that the dam had broken?

JZ: I was farming about thirty miles west of Rexburg, I have a farm out in Roberts and I happened to have the radio on as I was cultivating and heard Don Ellis say the dam was leaking then the dam had broken.

KW: And then what did you do when you heard that the dam had broken?

JZ: I immediately left the tractor, tried to locate my hired man, wasn’t able to do so and so I just got in the pick-up and headed for town, told a couple of people in Roberts, left instructions for the hired man to get in touch with me in Rexburg, that the dam had broken and he was to use his best judgment on continuing to run the farm for the next few days. And I drove one hundred miles per hour to Rexburg. I know from the experience of the ’62 flood where I’d seen the water rise four feet and come within a foot and a half of elevation of getting to where my present home is now. I know that if the flood of ’62 could come that close, I was in big trouble with the house where it sits now. We’re three-fourths of a mile from the Tetons and about six feet in elevation above the normal flow of the Tetons so I figured I’d get a foot and a half to two feet of water where I was. I was just four feet short. We got six feet of water at the house and there certainly was more than I had anticipated. I know there was seventeen miles of water back there but I didn’t believe I was going to get six feet of water. I got home, and my family was already gone. My mother had packed everyone up, my wife, my kids, everyone of them, and moved them up to her home on the hill. Both my wife and mother retuned and we spent about two hours packing food storage and whatever we considered valuable enough to save in the short period of time we tried to put a priority on things and save the bigger things, carrying them upstairs. We took a nineteen cubic foot freezer that was full, unloaded it, carried it upstairs, carried all the food up and loaded it back up, and felt that it would be safe upstairs. We carried all our food storage upstairs and set it on the kitchen floor, when we filled the floor up, then we packed the food storage up and put it on beds and on the table. All that was to no avail. Because we got six feet of water. It turned everything over in the house. Good storage was all ruined with exception of a few fifty-pound bags of sugar which happened to be on the bed and the bed floated. Box springs and mattresses floated long enough to keep it dry, but everything else was wet. Tipped the freezer that we had so carefully carried up those stairs, two of us, my mother and I, tipped it over, much of the food on the bottom of the freezer where water leaked in was ruined.
We were, however, able so save some of the meat and frozen vegetables and fruits that we had in there.

KW: What did you think when you saw the water coming?

JZ: Well, it was quite a sight, it wasn’t frightening as much as it was just disheartening. You could look out and see a dust cloud running just in front of a wall of water. You could look down into that wall of water coming and see animals, farm machinery, and equipment and just household goods being rolled in front of it. Just anything that was light moved right in that first wave and you could see it rolling in front of it. You could see herds of cattle; you could see some horses running in front of the water. I think the thing that impressed me most with the strength and force behind that was looking out and watching it move about two miles north of my place, just coming right straight in towards it. From the north and east, watching our neighbor’s places out there. When it hit Lee Johnson’s place, why his home moved immediately. I mean it didn’t sit there, it didn’t just buckle, the water hit and the home was moved. Then to watch the trailers go that fast too. It was hard to imagine how anything could stand in the way when you watched the water hit and within five seconds, trailers and two or three homes were already on their way down the river. That much force and that quickly, as it moved toward my place to watch it go into the old gravel pit, that was really fearful because it hit, this whole gravel pit is probably 300 yards and probably ten to fifteen yards deep. I’d seen that fill in ’62 but it was gradual compared to this. The gravel pit was probably full in thirty seconds and was just boiling just like you had a kettle full of boiling water, but this was 300 yards. Just to see the huge waves and they were boiling around and the forces coming in from the east, and from the north, and then coming back in from the northwest and all hitting there and just really forces at work. Took it about thirty seconds to fill that and then it rushed down the street towards my place and mine was one of nine houses on the block, two of which are being used today. The others, they couldn’t be repaired. To watch the water hit my home, hit my neighbors’ home, the water, but the neighbor on the east and his house just seemed to be like you blow a feather. If someone sneezed and the feather took off like that, that’s the way this home reacted. When that wall of water hit it, it just blew it and seemed to jump for about thirty feet until it hit in the trees in front of his house and pinned it there and then the neighbor two houses away, her house just picked up and floated off through the part, we were watching as it mowed down trees and as it missed one neighbor’s house by about five feet as it floated through. It was an experience to watch one neighbor’s house after another go and then stay and watch for two and a half to three hours expecting yours to go at any time was a disheartening experience. I never could understand why the home didn’t go. I expected it to and it was exciting to finally see the water start to recede and to build up your hope that maybe your home was going to stay there, that it had a chance of staying because for two hours I knew all along that eventually the home was going to go. It just couldn’t stand a pounding like that and still remain on the foundation. The Boise Cascade Homes and the Boise Cascades in that period of time, four years ago, they just brought in and set down on the foundations. They didn’t bolt them, they didn’t time them and ours was no exception. The only thing that saved our home was that last year, a year ago last August, I had a large garage built on the west end of the home and it was stick built and bolted
securely to the foundation and then the home was tied into the garage. The only thing that kept the home was the fact that the garage was tied down and held that end. The east end of our home actually floated with the flood, it pushed a small six-inch tree underneath the northeast corner of the home. Put about four inches of mud between the foundation and the plates and floor joists of the home and actually floated the east end up in the air, pushed it off the foundation three of four inches to the south and that night as the flood waters went down and I was able to get my four-wheel-drive and get back down to the house. We took a long rope and went in and we had about 150 feet of rope and we went in where there was about two feet of water left and started snaking the big trees and poles, corral post and barn timbers. There were eight by eight square barn timbers, ten by tens, ten, fifteen, twenty feet long—someone had a fantastic old barn, in fact, I think it was Wright’s old barn broke up and lodged in our trees and in the back of the house. We were able to pull much of that that we wouldn’t have been able to move without heavy machinery, we were able to hook on with the rope and guide it while one would walk through the water and guide the timbers and we took them out, and filled the road with all these heavy timbers and were able to clean up much of the yard just by floating it off when the water was still there, which was a real help to us, we were able to save the back lawn in that way be removing most of the debris, really heavy stuff that way. Then what we couldn’t move, we just left until the lawn dried up and then went in with chain saws and front-end loaders and cleaned up the rest of the back lawn. To look out across there though, most disheartening was to see the number of neighbors’ houses that were gone. I stood there with one neighbor and he watched his house float across the street and break up over in some trees and another neighbor stood and watched the foundation of his home cave in and his home site and went down he indicated his home was gone and then I went back up to my place after we’d watched for a couple of hours and I happened to run across him and he said your home’s gone too and I thought that that very well was the case, but I went back down to check and the home was still there and the water was finally receding. It was a tremendous relief to see it was still there. It was a relief right up until we took a look and were able to get inside and see the damage that was caused inside and then it was, well, we still felt luckier than the neighbors who had lost their homes entirely. But since going through the experience, I have wondered if that’s really the case. Many of the people’s homes that were broken up and washed right away could just go in and tear things up and start over anew and were in a much better position than we were to go back in and try to save and rebuild. A lot of heartbreak and a lot of work went into that. When they rebuild that dam again and if that happens, I’m not sure I’d feel the same way about rebuilding as opposed to just tearing it down. Our home was actually on the borderline, we could either rebuild or tear it down and start over building off the foundation and having it damaged as heavily as it was qualified the home to be either knocked down. We had our choice, either rebuild it or knock it down and start over, we had the choice. It was faster and a lot more individual work and just a lot more time and energy spent in doing that than it would have been in going the other way.

KW: What was actually destroyed?

JZ: We lost everything in the basement, we had to tear out all the walls, where it wasn’t knocked down when the water came through the basement windows, it had such force
that if knocked all the interior walls out, so we had to tear what was left of the sheet rock and the paneling off the walls that was. Throw the ceilings out; insulation had to rebuild some interior walls. Well, to begin with, the first thing we had to do was, we had to jack the home up. I borrowed twelve ton hydraulic jacks from a couple of the farmers around and used one of my own. Jacked the home up in the air, then cleaned out from under it all the mud, silt, manure, alfalfa and everything our from between the foundation and the floor joists, bottom plate of the home and borrowed a four-wheel-drive tractor and gently pushed the home back onto the foundation. We had to move it about three inches to the north. We removed the tree that had pushed into the basement and pushed it back onto the foundation, then lowered it down and we had to go in and tear all the interior walls out that were too severely damaged. We were able to straighten some and then tear off all the ceiling, the insulation, sheetrock; we went right back down to just bare studs and concrete walls. We replaced much of the electrical wiring and at this time we went ahead and had a fireplace put in that we had left a hole in the foundation for some four years before, but never had the time or energy or the money to complete. We just received our income tax back and had enough money before the flood to go ahead and put that fireplace in so when everything was torn up we went ahead and put a fireplace in. We made changes in the basic home that we never would have done had the flood not occurred. It seemed to be a natural time to go ahead and do it. Everything was wrecked; you might as well fix it the way you wanted to so we changed a few things upstairs. Took one room out and made a larger kitchen, we tore the cabinets that were upstairs in the kitchen out and took them downstairs and had to rebuild much of the interior. On all the versiboard that was in the cabinets swelled up and bubbled, and the chipboard that was in there, that all had to be replaced and then we were able to use those cabinets downstairs. They’re not great, but they’re better than throwing them away, so we had them repaired and are using them there. We had to tear up all the floors upstairs, being as the carpets were ruined, of course, the versiboard that sits over the top of the flooring, the sub floor, all bubbled and came up in different areas. That was really one of the difficult jobs, was tearing that up and getting the floor back down flat, so it didn’t creek and didn’t move around. The whole floor was tacked and glued and then the water got underneath it in some places and separated the glue and bubbled the versiboard. You’d have to take a skill saw and cut a square out around that, and then replace that square, that’s the way we did it anyway. Proved to be too much of a problem to remove all the versiboard so we just took up what we needed to and replaced those pieces that bubbled and it seemed to work out. We replaced all the insulation upstairs, tore out the inside, replaced the insulation, put the same insulating factors back in as it had before, then sheet-rocked it up four inches high. First we only cut our two feet, but found it was too hard to patch, it didn’t fit in smoothly on the two-foot patch, so we went back in and tore it out another two feet high and put in full sheets of four-foot sheetrock and patched those in it. It looks, now you can’t tell the difference between when it was new and the way it’s rebuilt now. We took a power sprayer, and went in and sterilized everything, washed everything down, so there’s no mud at all showing. Washed right down to the studs, then we went in and took a wood preservative and painted all the wood in the basement and upstairs that was touched by this water. We wood-lacked everything, so the home smells new, it’s got a clean smell to it. Where as some that you go in where they didn’t tear out all the walls, you still have the flood smell. There was more work involved than there was
compensation. When you went about rebuilding your home, there was so much that will
never be compensated, which you really didn’t expect or you really weren’t asking for.
There’s just so many little things that you had to do that it didn’t count towards
reclaiming any money from the Bureau of Reclamation. You’re at it all day long. It took
so much time. My wife spent hours and hours working on small things like chipping up
the spots on the versiboard that you would cut a square out, pop the square up, pull the
staples out and get most of it up, but small pieces of that board would adhere to the sub
flooring and then there was no way to get those up except take a hammer, chisel, and get
down on your knees and spend hours chiseling that thing flat, so you didn’t have a high
spot when you put the next square of versiboard down. Just problems in rebuilding that
you never see in building a home. It’s much easier to go ahead and build a home than it
is to go in and try to repair a home like that, just small problems. Problems like you
couldn’t buy a chisel in all of Rexburg. I went all over; I couldn’t get one at CAL-Ranch.
They were all sold out. What wasn’t sold out, they couldn’t find. Went down to
Michelson’s. They didn’t have any. You just couldn’t find a simple chisel. Finally went
down to Madison Co-op, didn’t know exactly where they were, but they pointed to one
particular area back in there and said, “If you can find a chisel back there in all that mess,
we’ll sell it to you for half price.” So I went in and dug around for an hour or so and
found two chisels, and everybody just picked up whatever they had in stores, and boxed
them up in garbage cans, pails, and buckets and trying to buy anything in this town was
ridiculous. They understood the problem, but it was just more aggravation added to the
problems you already had. Try to rebuild, try to get something done. I couldn’t buy a
Skil saw, mine was ruined in the flood, went to Mickelson’s and they offered me a Skil
saw at half price if I’d just repair it. CAL-Ranch had sold all theirs out, the same sort of
ting. You can buy a Skil saw if you happen to be electrically minded. You can take it
all apart, wash it out, dry it up, then if you’re lucky, if the switch mechanism runs. It’s
just that sort of thing. There was a lot of aggravation attempting to come up with the
tools and means to go about helping yourself to rebuild. I suppose I’d still do it again,
but I’d sure be a lot wiser and having been through it once where I’d do a few things
differently. Go out and buy all your tools clear out away from Rexburg, at the nearest
unaffected area and then move back in. My wife claims she wouldn’t do it again. If she
heard the dam had broke, she’d put a five-gallon can of gas in the basement and drop a
match which is probably a pretty accurate barometer of the way she feels. She was much
more affected that was I. I worked on it for about a month and a half, then had to go back
to farming. After farming I went into football, and after football, to teaching school. All
this time she spent every single day working on the house. Cleaning up the yard, cleaning
up the house, trying to save fruit bottles. She really did the work on the interior of the
home after the heavy stuff was done while she cleaned things up, she got it ready for the
carpenters, she kept the pressure on the carpenters to come and get things done. Then she
did all her work on working with various government agencies in obtaining a small
business administration loan, which I might add was ridiculous. The flood affected the
people between Sugar City and up in the Rexburg area and very little damage done
comparatively in Idaho Falls, which turned out to be a full-time job just trying to get a
small business administration loan. The amount of paperwork and the number of times
you went back and forth was trying, a very trying experience in just trying to comply
with all the regulations and get yourself qualified to get some money and start rebuilding.
That was one of our biggest complaints and gripes that sometimes the government agencies were set up for the convenience of the people working in them rather than for the convenience of the people who were affected by the flood.

KW: Were there any organizations that really helped out with the flood victims?

JZ: Yes, there were many organizations. The ones that stand out most clearly in my mind are the LDS Church and numbers of people who volunteered to come in and spend a day, two days, three days, and work helping us clean up. Many of the people who came to work brought their equipment, brought heavy equipment. These liquid manure pumps and slurry spreaders, tremendous help with those we had five pumps pumping out the basement in our home. We were able to get the water down fast enough that it didn’t crack the concrete and didn’t break up the foundation and those people were here in a day and spent the better part of three weeks, different individuals, not the same people. I know of one fellow, in fact he’s a friend of mine, that had a slurry, one of these big liquid manure spreaders, which is a big tank with a suction device that suck water manure, or whatever liquid manure up into the tank, maybe a thousand gallons. And then you can shut it off, take it out and spread it on the fields. Well, these were tremendous help. Just put it down in the basement, slurp up a thousand gallons, take it down a clock away and dump it into the gravel pits, come back. It took us three days to get the water out of the basement when you think of a home that size, the size of ours; anyway it takes a lot of time to get the water out. The drains weren’t working, we had to take everything out and like I say, we were lucky enough to get these machines early and borrow them from friends and neighbors and get the pumps going and get your home baled out before it broke up the cement. That’s one of the things that many of the people are finding now is that the foundations are cracking and caving in. If the home is good above it. They still had to raise the home. And now go in and break up the foundation and replace the foundation underneath and then put the home back down. That’s a tremendous financial expense. Besides that it takes a lot of machinery and it ties up people from getting back into their homes. The people that came in and helped were just fabulous. I know I cleaned up the upstairs, that wasn’t bad but to force myself to go into the basement of my home was really difficult. When we had five or six volunteers ready to go standing there asking you what to do. You’d done everything, but go into the basement. You didn’t want to go down there in all that muck and garbage. Our home sits just south and east of my neighbor’s corrals and low pastures and we took the full brunt of it and there was --- piled knee deep in the basement. That was tough. I kept putting it off and finally I had five or six people that were volunteers that were standing ready to help us out and we had done everything else. We were just making time so it finally forced me to go into the basement and we got started. We’d go in and wade in that stuff. Throw it out the window, break up your furniture, and pass it out the window, tear up the carpets, cut them up in little pieces so you could drag them out. We had to cut every carpet in about four-foot strips because they were so heavy we couldn’t roll them up and get them out the window. I took my four-wheel-drive, hooked it on the four-foot strip of carpet and we’d pull them out the windows. That’s the way we got them out. Have to break up your furniture and hand it out the windows and then start shoveling manure and silt, broken bottles, all your wheat, beans, and everything else that had sprouted and was decaying
there in the basement. That was really tough and the volunteers made it at least livable because they got the job done fairly fast and after we’d finished cleaning up my home we went to clean up Stegelmeier’s. After Stegelmeier’s, went to Jerry’s aunt’s, then to another little widow’s home. It seemed like everyone else was doing the same as soon as you finished one home, you picked up the whole crew and started on another one. Pretty good feeling. You forgot what your home looked like and had a good feeling from helping someone else. And I really learned to appreciate some of the agencies that came in. Members of the LDS Church that came in, one thousand strong. And helped out, the Mennonite Relief Crew, and stayed for months and worked. Red Cross was a fantastic help and they were in there as early as anyone else and stayed until, I think they stayed for three months. Some of these organizations, you got a pretty good feeling for the way they handled disasters and the way they were prepared and willing to do it.

KW: How do you think the National Guard and State Police helped out? Do you think they did a good job from keeping from vandalizing?

JZ: I’m not really sure on that one, Kyle. I think they did their job in that they kept pretty good security on things. I wasn’t in a position to evaluate the looting that went on if there was such. I heard that there was some like I say; I really wasn’t in a position to know whether it was held to a minimum or whether there would have been that amount, whether the police were there or not. I had a good feeling about it. I don’t believe they did a poor job. As far as I know, I guess what I’m saying is the job was done well and acceptable. Some things I know irritates people and one of them people and one of them was that State Police would be coming in and all very cleaned up, good looking, clean, no mess on them. They were eating in the same area the rest of us were up to our ears in mud and there was just a contrast. Some people looking very sharp and very military and others very dirty, ill-kept. Looked like they’d been working all day, very distraught, just a contrast there. I feel good about the job they did.

KW: Was there a lot of people that moved out of the area because of the flood or did they just take it in their stride?

JZ: I think very few people moved out because of the flood. Some people who had an opportunity to move things, their business was damaged or livelihood was changed, saw opportunity to move it seemed to be a natural time just like it was a natural time to change the floor plan of your house if you didn’t like it. And I think probably some people were damaged financially by the flood found that a natural time to seek other areas of the country. I don’t believe that there are a lot of people that moved. There are some and for good reason some farms are gone. They’ll have relocate somewhere else. Some business opportunities opened up elsewhere, it was a natural time to take the money they had coming from compensation and start somewhere else if they had it in mind.

KW: What would be your reaction if they decided to build another dam on the same place?
JZ: Well, my reaction would be yes, the need for the dam is still there. We still have potential drought conditions, we still need farm ground irrigated, we still need the spring run-off controlled and stored so we don’t just lose that water. We still need help in controlling a flood in the spring so that we don’t damage farm ground, so the need for the dam is still there. However, I think it’s been shown that the area in which they built the dam is very difficult to work in and build a safe dam. Now if they determine that the dam should be rebuilt and that they want to rebuild, I’m all for it. I’m certainly all for a thorough investigation of dam sight and material used. If we are going to rebuild, we need to rebuild safely.