The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Keith L. Hansen – Life During the Teton Flood

By Keith L. Hansen

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Box 6 Folder 30

Oral Interview conducted by Mary Ann Beck

Transcribed by Kip Nichols

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
MB: Mr. Hansen, where were you born?
KH: At Rexburg, Idaho.
MB: How long have you lived in Rexburg?
KH: About thirty years.
MB: Would you spell your full name, please?
KH: Keith L. Hansen.
MB: How old are you?
KH: Forty-six.
MB: Do you have a family?
KH: Just the wife and I.
MB: How many were living in your home at the time of the flood?
KH: Just the two of us.
MB: What was your address at the time of the flood?
KH: Rexburg, west of Rexburg.
MB: What is your present address?
KH: At the same location. We’ve moved back to our residence.
MB: What do you do for a living?
KH: I’m a farmer.
MB: How long have you lived in this area?
KH: About thirty years.
MB: Did you own your own home and farm?
KH: Yes.
MB: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?
KH: I support it highly.

MB: Why?

KH: I feel that this is one of the greatest reclamation and flood control projects that’s ever been undertaken. It’s unfortunate that it wasn’t completed and the homework done on it to where it would hold.

MB: Did you or any member of your family have any premonition of the Teton disaster?

KH: None that I know of.

MB: Where were you and your family when the Teton flood hit?

KH: I went to prepare to cultivate beets that day.

MB: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed?

KH: My first reaction, hearing it on the radio while I was in the field, I felt that I should, being a member of the local National Guard unit, I felt that I should go to the armory and prepare to move the equipment to high grounds for later use.

MB: Did your wife try to save any household or personal items?

KH: Just a few personal items. We felt that if the high water did come it wouldn’t do a great lot of damage, which was our mistake.

MB: Did you see the flood coming?

KH: Only as it entered Rexburg and I followed ahead of the water out to high ground.

MB: What did it look like?

KH: As the water was coming I couldn’t see any particular water. It was the debris that was being pushed, logs, houses, and what have you. I happened to be in the trailer court west of Rexburg at the time when it broke over that canal. It was the debris that was pushing the trailers and the houses along. I didn’t really see any water until I got up to high ground behind the debris.

MB: What is your role in the National Guard in Rexburg?

KH: My role, I’m a platoon sergeant of one of the platoons in our company.

MB: When did Idaho call the Guard out?
KH: It was approximately between 12:00 and 12:30.

MB: What were your duties?

KH: Our duties the first evening were, some of the people assisted the local police and the sheriff’s department with security. My platoon was in charge of picking up the frozen meats and frozen products from the restaurants and the food stores of Rexburg and returning them to the college freezer locker.

MB: Could you tell us what duties you had? How many days were you on duty?

KH: We were on nine days.

MB: Would you tell us the events of each day?

KH: I could pretty well. The first day, I could tell you the duties my platoon had during this period of time.

   The following day, we commenced about 6:30 in the morning and we were given a road project proceeding through the Hibbard area and the Hibbard loop road and we pushed debris off the roads and get the road passable as quickly as possible. That pretty well took us about all the first day.

   The second day, we commenced in hauling loads of gravel in the washed area and filling in each side of the bridges going to Hibbard through to nearly the Snake River north of Hibbard. This is far as we could go because from there on the bridges were all out completely.

   The third day, fourth day, and fifth day were also contributed to this same type of projects. We assisted the cleanup crew with hauling dead animals. We pulled logs from ditches. We ran road patrols and smoothing the roads for the big heavy construction equipment that moved in by that time. We tried to save a bridge on Highway 88. We hauled something like 400 loads of gravel on 88 to the river but as we got the road passable we discovered that the 88 bridge was beyond repair so it was closed. We also assisted in some project work over at Sugar City which consisted of cleaning debris from ditches, getting a few roads that were passable.

   Approximately in the fifth day, there was a crew of people that went south of Blackfoot on a demolition project and there they opened up a river channel that was still high water at that time, for it to flow a little bit easier to American Falls Dam. The headquarters group of our National Guard unit that was out of Idaho Falls, they assisted the Civil Defense people with coordination, radio communications and some little coordination work between Boise and Rexburg here. Also they had a flight of helicopters out of Boise which belonged to the Cav units that assisted in bring in some medical supplies which fortunately wasn’t needed at the time, but they were brought in. They stayed nearly twelve days with their operation.

   During this time, we got our armory back in shape to where we could work out of it but as a whole it was mostly assisting with projects that the
Civil Defense people gave us such as we’d, removing animals in ditch rows and bringing them to the road so the cleanup crew could haul them away to a disposal area. Also, we operated two D-7 dozers in backfilling two landfill dumps that we had in operation at the time.

MB: How much water was around the Guard Armory?

KH: Approximately five feet.

MB: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

KH: I didn’t have a particular or any miraculous experience. Our family suffered one death which was a nephew of ours. His name was David Benson. He and a friend of his that Saturday morning went fishing approximately three quarters of a mile downstream of the dam. They were fishing on an island when the dam burst. Unfortunately, he was one of the drowning victims. His body was floated down and washed up on a high stretch of land approximately two miles downstream of the dam. He was picked up with a helicopter group out of Rigby and transported to the Reserve Center on the hill and at that time he was transported down to Idaho Falls and from there to the St. Anthony mortuary. David’s funeral as it progressed was televised by a Salt Lake station and was attended by quite a group of the family and local people and his parents were interviewed by Senator Church in connection with the death. David’s folks were interviewed by the Reader’s Digest people for the story that was later printed in the Digest itself.

MB: Did you see any animals trying to escape the floodwaters?

KH: The only animals that I saw was in the area that evening that we went down to the armory and on down south. We happened to see a large crate, it appeared to be a crate. It probably could have been most of anything. It was approximately four feet wide and six feet long and there was a large pig riding this box down as the water was receding. I would imagine it was a pretty excited pig because he didn’t look too content. Outside of animals, the only animals I had seen were the animals the next day which was one of our guard duties. We went up to search the town under the debris or if there was any lingering bodies or such and we ran onto quite a number of animals that were stranded and trapped in the debris. We killed approximately three animals that were in pretty rough condition. I particularly noticed our horse later close to my farm out here that was quite badly beaten from the debris and flood as it was caught in the waters. Later that evening the sheriff’s department came out and killed the animal.

MB: Where did you and your wife stay during the first week after the flood?

KH: The first week I spent in the Fieldhouse with the National Guard. This is where we slept during the night. The first three days my wife stayed with the Butlers. Then she moved up to St. Anthony where she assisted in making preparations and
plans for the funeral. After the funeral she went down to Idaho Falls with her sister for two or three days and then from there she took a room up at the dormitories at Ricks College. At the end of the nine day period when the guard was released from their duties, I went back up and we lived at the dormitories for approximately four or five more days. By that time we were able to come back and get something going at our home, get it washed up and cleaned up enough to where we could temporarily set up a bed and stay here at our residence.

MB: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your property?

KH: My wife was able to return to our home approximately late Monday afternoon. She rode with the neighbors approximately three quarters of a mile from our home. At that time the water and the debris in the roads was such that they couldn’t travel by vehicle any farther. At that time she walked on top of the debris up the road and to where our residence is at. As she got here she had noted there was still approximately one foot of water around the house and she was able to wade in through the water and see what damages had been down to the home. The debris that was in the road that my wife had managed to walk on top and get here without having to wade in too much water was hangar roofs from the airport. There was part of the corrals and the show buildings from the county fairgrounds. There were logs, there were piles of lumber, there was house debris, there was even an automobile that was stuck in the middle of some of this debris. The damage that she had noticed when she had stopped at our residence is the amount of debris that had lodged in the garden and the corrals and the shop buildings and outbuildings was in the neighborhood of probably hundreds of tons of debris that was piled around the yard and next to our home.

Our home suffered watered damage, a small amount of structural damage but fortunately the debris had lodged in such a fashion that the heavy damage didn’t occur here. We had one granary that floated around the debris and lodged in the county road right directly in front of our home. I brought a loader, a small loader that the Guard had down to attempt to push this off the road to make the road passable. But this was all in vain. The fact that it had sunk into the mud so far that that it couldn’t be moved so we returned the following day with a D-7 and finished our job. We pushed it off the road approximately five to ten feet making the road passable.

Also we had a friend that had approximately ten pigs out in our corrals at the time of the flood. In all the excitement and the hectic situation that had taken place in the family and the funeral and all, my wife hadn’t discovered the pigs for approximately five days later. At that time all ten pigs or hogs had survived the flood. They were extremely hungry, but I’m sure they weren’t thirsty, at which time my brother-in-law happened to be here at our home and he managed to pry one of our granaries open and get a few buckets full of wet soggy grain and feed the pigs.

Also a very amusing situation here is at the time the word was given my wife had to leave because we didn’t leave here together because I was already at the Guard Armory getting their equipment and it was lunch time and she had left
her dinner on the table and on the stove and when she returned and dinner no
doubt wasn’t in too good of shape but all the plates and things were still set out
and all intact.

MB: What is your most cherished item you lost?

KH: Well, in all honesty I think the most cherished item or situation is that the lost of
our nephew which we felt pretty bad about. Some of the items that we didn’t lose
that we were quite fortunate was my wife’s genealogy that was saved all intact.

MB: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the flood-waters
rolling through the area?

KH: I couldn’t believe what I was watching. We saw houses floating, debris, logs,
trailer houses. From the top of the roof of the armory I observed logs from the
sawmill that were tossed in the air like toothpicks. This is when we realized that
maybe we had better clear the area and do it fast.

MB: What did you do at the Reserve Center?

KH: At the Reserve Center we were waiting for the waters to recede so we could be
sent out on various projects that they were getting organized to go. While we
were there the Civil Defense director was setting up his operations, the city police
had already had their communications set up, the National Guard had already set
up their communications with Idaho Falls and Boise. This was done very quickly
and the coordination with the various agencies such as the Bureau of
Reclamation, the State Police, the local city police I should say, were very well
organized and were underway very quickly.

MB: How was their communications?

KH: As near as I could tell I though the communications were excellent.

MB: How did you go about cleaning up your property?

KH: Our property was done by family mostly, my wife, and for a few days we had an
LDS church group that came in and helped us. And the biggest and the heaviest
debris was removed by the soil conservation and subcontracted to contractors that
were contracted to do this type of work.

MB: What were some of the problems with which you were confronted, problems that
gave you the most frustrations?

KH: Some of the problems that we encountered were that the water had saturated the
soil so heavily that it took a long time for the water to settle, to sink out of the soil
to where the big heavy equipment could get on the land and remove this debris.
Some of the more frustrating things that we had, the fact that when the gas company turned our gas on we had appliances that wouldn’t work, laundry system that wasn’t functioning, sewers. We just had a lot of inconveniences in our living that we were used to every day.

MB: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

KH: Not really that I can think of that was too uplifting. I met a lot of nice people that the Bureau brought in, a few people from the Indian Reservations down south in Arizona that came in. All in all, why, outside of meeting a lot of nice fine people why, I can’t think of anything too unusual.

MB: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

KH: Not to any great degree. There were probably some small vandalisms but nothing of any significance.

MB: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

KH: Some of the government aid that we received was, the Red Cross was very helpful in supplying us with cleaning supplies, equipment to start our home cleaning. The Red Cross food disposal service up at the college was excellent where we received our meals which we partook for nearly a month or a month and a half before we were able to do any cooking or anything in our home. I think one of the biggest aids to us was the Soil Conservation cleanup program. Also I might add that the church groups that came in that helped us were excellent.

MB: Did you receive a lot of assistance from the Red Cross?

KH: Yes. We received the first emergency things that we needed like some food, clothing and things that we were in real need of.

MB: What government agency did you deal with during the recovery operations?

KH: We dealt pretty closely with the Soil Conservation in this area.

MB: Did you have any dealings with county or state authorities and law enforcement officers during the flood?

KH: Yes. We had the sheriff’s department that had a roving patrol throughout the night. Also we had some Civil Defense people that came through with water surveys of our drinking supplies and a few areas of, in this situation. Also, we leased a little cat that we had and a backhoe for approximately five or six days to Hartwell and Kennaday on cleanup. During this time we dealt with some of the Soil Conservation’s supervisors and in this situation until the big heavy equipment came in then of course, we pulled our small material off.
MB: Did HUD help you any?

KH: HUD came in with some assistance. They got our sewer system back in operation, they cleaned up our well, put us a new pump down, replaced some of our electrical outlets, helped us get our refrigerator and cooling system, water heater back in operation. They also got us a temporary screening to keep the insects out of our home basically they brought a sanitation crew in and sanitized our house.

MB: Did HUD do a good job?

KH: I felt they did an excellent job under the circumstances.

MB: Did the BOR treat you fair?

KH: I felt that they did. We had a few discrepancies but overall I felt that we got excellent treatment from those people.

MB: Did the ASC and the Soil Conservation have an emergency program to bring the crops back in and the land back into shape?

KH: Yes, they have an excellent program for assistance in land leveling, debris cleanup, ditch restoration, in this they have a real excellent program.

MB: Do you feel that any who assisted in recovery operations took advantage of you or the government, especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it?

KH: I don’t feel that the people that I dealt with were unduly out of reason. I felt that it seemed awful high for the things that they charged for per hour and equipment rentals and this sort of thing, but it was with the nation’s price area I felt.

MB: Without divulging any names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

KH: Not personally. I have heard a couple of areas and read in the paper about a couple of fellows that had, but other than that I don’t know.

MB: Do you feel that the flood was divine punishment or a man-made disaster?

KH: Oh, I can’t help but think it was a man-made disaster.

MB: Why?

KH: Oh, there were no earth tremors or any of this sort of thing at the time. I felt that the reason the dam failed is the fact that it was put in fast and there wasn’t a great
lot of homework that was done and I felt that it was just a poor engineer job. Yes, I feel that it was a man-made disaster.

MB: Do you feel that the dam should be rebuilt? If so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?

KH: Yes, I feel the dam should be rebuilt for water conservation and the thing that it was intended to originally. I feel myself that with the research completed and a lot more research done that the dam can be put back in the same location. But I felt that the necessary instrumentation that is required for the dam should be installed and some other precautions to prevent this sort of thing in the future.

MB: Do you think it was a good learning experience?

KH: I felt that is some areas, yes. It’s kind of a difficult question to answer. If I did learn anything I could’ve done without the education.

MB: Do you think it was a dry-run for something bigger in our lives to come?

KH: Oh, I don’t feel that it is. There was a lot of physical damage but other than that I can’t really say honestly that it would be.

MB: How has the Teton disaster changed your life?

KH: Well, it hasn’t done us any good financially. And it’s created a lot of extra work that we normally wouldn’t have done. Oh, probably it’s brought us a little closer family-wise and neighbor-wise and we’ve learned to be a little bit more neighborly.

MB: What did you think about Appreciation Day that was held on June 4th?

KH: I thought Appreciation day was a very excellent thought and I’m sure that the people that came from the outer areas that came for the Appreciation Day that looked over the situation also got the same feeling we did, that it was a job well done.

MB: Do you have anything to add?

KH: Well, in concluding, I think I can sum it up with the fact that we had excellent coordination through the Guard with our commanding general, General Brooks, that spent a few days in our area helping coordinating the situation between the governor’s office and Rexburg. Also I have to make some comments on the observing where we were in the construction line with the Guard and around the problems and the road construction and the things, that I have a great appreciation for the contractors that came in such as Gibbons and Reed, Burggraf, Hartwell and Kennaday, H & H Construction and some of these people. I felt that they did
an excellent job in their program in smoothing out some of the rough places. Of course, again, this group of people that have the know-how and the engineering and the equipment in back of them to do this sort of a program. I felt without this group of people and including the Guard and our local Sheriff’s Department, State Police, the LDS Church, Ricks College, that this was an area that without this group of people that we would really be in a dire need that this such as Ricks College with housing, food preparation, I felt that it really has aided our comforts in this disaster. I’m sure without the college program, the church program, the state program, we wouldn’t be getting back in condition and shape as rapidly as we have.

MB: Thank you, Mr. Hansen.