SF: This interview is taking place in Treasureton, Idaho. Kendell Fuller is being interviewed by his brother Steven Fuller.

Ken, what happened when you first heard, or how did you hear about the dam disaster? What were your first warnings or reactions?

KF: The first thing that we heard about the dam breaking was from our neighbors, which is my wife’s aunt, came over and told us about it. At the time, I had been watching the baseball game on television, it happened to be my favorite team, the Yankees, were playing that day. One of the reasons that I was there at the house was because they were on that day, and I had decided not to go fishing up the river, which I had done several Saturdays in a row.

SF: This, the Teton River?

KF: This is the South Fork of the Teton, which is about one hundred and fifty yards from the back of my house. So it was very close and very handy for me to fish on. I had done this quite a bit. It probably would have been disastrous for me if I would have done that because there’s a lot of brush and trees and things of this nature that I go through to get on the river to fish and probably could not have heard anyone trying to warn me about the dam breaking, if I would have been on the river fishing. If it wasn’t for this ball game on TV, I probably would have been up there fishing. I don’t know if I would have still be up there at the time that the water came down or not. This was around noon when we heard the dam had broken. We probably were there in the house, and the neighbors came over and said that we had to evacuate.

SF: How much warning did you have?

KF: From the time that they told us that the dam had broken ‘til the time that the water had actually hit our house, was probably in the neighborhood of an hour and a half. More than we thought we had. We thought that the time was very short, but the distance from the dam to our house was great enough that it took longer than we thought.

SF: Did you take anything with you, any personal belongings?

KF: Well, when we first heard the dam had broken we, of course, turned on the radio on, which everybody did, I think, to try to find out just exactly what kind of a flood we were going to have. I think most people probably thought, as we did, that at first the river would get higher and flood over the banks then come seeping into the house and maybe get water in the basement. This is what I think that most people thought. I remember one report distinctly, the man on the radio said, “We expect three feet at the Army Store,” which is just a few fields from our house. If this would have been the case, of course, we wouldn’t have had too much damage other than to the basement.

So in regard to taking things, we had to bless our baby and name our baby in church the next day, which was Sunday, of course. We weren’t sure after we heard this that we able to get back into the house to get our Sunday clothes and things that we needed to bless the baby. So I took my Sunday clothes, my wife took her Sunday clothes,
and she also took some other clothes for the kids. I think she grabbed a basket of dirty
clothes for the kids and packed that. We also took our sleeping bags, in case it would
have been hard to get back in to sleep that night.

We debated a lot of whether or not we should take our pickup and our car. My
first thought was to lock the pickup in the garage and let it be there. I thought it would be
fine. I thought well, maybe we ought to take both rigs out because it may come in handy
to have them both. We loaded up the kids and each drove a rig out. Our next move was
to go down to Diane’s, my wife’s parents’ place and try to help them a little bit.

SF: So you really had no idea of the magnitude, you thought it was going to be a
temporary thing you could get back in?

KF: I think most people felt that way, too. That was the way it was with us. No one,
unless it was just a few people who worked on the dam, that were engineers, knew. One
engineering firm that I worked at, Forsgren and Perkins, I’m sure some of the people that
worked there knew of the magnitude of what was going to happen. As far as we’re
concerned, I think that most people didn’t realize how long they had, and secondly, they
had no idea how bad it was going to be. They probably could have loaded a lot of stuff,
and saved a lot of stuff had they known they had an hour or an hour and a half. You can
get quite a bit of stuff in your pickup or your car, not big items, but precious things, if we
simply would have known how bad it was going to be. From the indications that we
heard on the radio, they didn’t think it was going to be anything like the wall of water
that came.

In fact, after I went down to my in-law’s place, we helped get some of his animals
rounded up; we even locked some of his calves in the back porch of his house. We tried
to save them in case the water was swift. As we were doing that, I decided to go back to
my house, which I did by myself. It’s only about a mile from where my in-laws live. I
went down in the basement and got quite a few boxes of my papers and books, things like
that, that were on the floor there that I had kind of forgotten about when we left in such a
hurry. I brought them upstairs, put a lot of them on the beds. I moved quite a few things
up on tables and beds, just in case the water should get in the upstairs part of my house.

SF: I know you were able to observe the flood from the hills up in the dry farms up by
Rexburg. What did it look like?

KF: Well, we weren’t actually in the dry farms; we were in the town itself, because there
are a lot of homes up there. Some people were on the dry farms too, but we were high
enough so that we could see it very well. It was quite a distance so we couldn’t see too
plain, we didn’t have any binoculars or anything. It looked as if a great, massive, huge,
brown lake, a gray-brown lake, was just spreading over the valley. Of course, it was so
big that it didn’t look like it was moving too fast. But from what I understand it was
probably moving anywhere from ten to twenty miles an hour, especially from some of the
things you see floating and moving in the water. It was just slowly creeping out,
spreading out over the valley as far as you could see. Tin sheds, the roofs of building,
sheds, things like that were very plain to see floating in the water.
SF: How did you feel when you saw the water begin to approach your own home and perhaps the vicinity?

KF: Well, we didn’t know exactly then how bad it was. We didn’t know how deep it really was, or what kind of force it was coming with. We knew it was worse than we thought it was going to be. As it approached our house, we wondered, what it [was] going to happen to us if our home is ruined? I think everyone thought that. Then as the water approached it just sort of engulfed our house. We could see it and then we couldn’t see it. Then we had forced feelings then, we wondered what did happen to it. Our thoughts turned to family and my wife’s family who was just living down the road from us. Practically all the people we were related to on my wife’s side were in the flood. So we had some thoughts about that too. What was going to happen to all of us because we had no one really to turn to? I remember distinctly what my little boy said, when I was trying to explain to him what had happened. He was three years old, and I was holding him as we were watching. I was trying to explain to him what happened. He said, “Daddy, does that mean that my toys are all gone, won’t I have any more toys?” I remember distinctly how hard it was to explain to him that probably not. But we really didn’t know what to say. We didn’t know the situation at our home then at that time.

SF: Who did you first turn to for help?

KF: Some of Diane’s, my wife’s relatives knew some people that lived on the hill that said that we could stay there if we needed to. Then Diane’s brother that lived in Rigby, about twelve miles south said, if you have to, come down to our place. That is eventually what we ended up doing a little later on that afternoon. Well, not much later because we loaded up the kids and took off right way. As I left Rexburg, driving just out of the south end of town, the water was very visible on the road that I was on. Just up the street a ways, you could see it filling up the streets and the area very rapidly. We got out of there probably not more than five minutes before we would have had to stay in Rexburg. We stayed with relatives there in Rigby for a few days and then came further south and stayed with differed members of my family off and on for about three weeks.

SF: What were some of the things that were destroyed by the flood?

KF: Well, our home was completely washed off its foundation, split in two parts. One part ended up about two miles away. Our roof and the kitchen part with everything crushed underneath and the roof of our neighbor’s right next door smashed up against a canal bank with trees with other debris and things that had washed down from the flood. Another piece of our home, the bedroom part, stayed together a little bit and was about a half a mile down the field and lodged on a ditch-back.

Course most everything was gone. We did crawl through the part against the canal bank underneath the roof and found the refrigerator and a few of those things still there. Most of them all caved in at the end. I thought, at first, what should I try to get out of there to save. I’ve got to get as much as I can now. I don’t have anything. This was the big question on lots of people’s minds, what should they try to save and what
shouldn’t they. Of course, we had no idea what was going to happen to us then with all of our personal belongings and the things that we had.

For instance there was a chair from our kitchen set that was under the roof of that house down there. This was a metal chair and in perfect condition and as far as we could see, hadn’t been bent or damaged. It was under this smashed roof, which was in all different contortions and smashed up against the canal bank. We pulled that thing out and are using it now in our new home. In the part of the house that stayed up in the field, the water line in the room was all in different directions and different heights, where the house apparently had rocked back and forth and been washed, but there happened to be a few items that were perfectly dry. They were on the top shelf of my little boy’s closet, my rifle and my shotgun didn’t have a bit of water on them, and were not hurt at all. Some of the books that were up there were still on the shelves, not hurt. Some of my clothes that were in the closet were still hanging in the closet, some of them wet, some of them terribly mud soaked, some of them we were able to save, others we simply couldn’t get the silt out of them. My wife’s clothes, on the other hand, were all gone. I tried to explain to her that was the way it was supposed to be.

SF: What were some of the things that were personal or very precious to you that were lost that can’t be replaced?

KF: I think some of the main things that we lost were things like pictures of our children, pictures that we had saved, things that we had made, things that we had when we were younger, things that I had lost from the mission field. I had a foot locker that was just full of things from my mission, all completely ruined or washed away. Many things like this that were completely gone and never found again, and yet we did find a few things in the area of the field between our home and the direction it had floated off. We found things like silverware; we found our toaster, which we were able to get to work for a time. My mother took it and tried to clean it up, got it to work, but then it burned the toast about every other time and we finally had to throw it away. In fact, this happened to many, many people, with things like machinery or things that they saved that had motors in them. Many people got them all cleaned up, got them running and then they quit on them, the same thing with cars that went through the flood. I have never heard of anyone that had anything that went through the flood that had a motor in it that worked good, or that they could get it to run consistently after the flood. But things that we lost, precious things like pictures of our wedding, all of our wedding pictures, things that you can’t replace, those are the things that we miss the most.

SF: What was in your initial reaction, who do you blame it on? Or do you?

KF: I’ve never really felt very bitter about the whole thing as I know some people did, I think probably because of the age differences. Some people had worked all their lives to build something, a home, a farm, and lost it all in just a few minutes that Saturday afternoon. Someone like us, we had a new home, had been in it fourteen months. Of course, we liked our home and we worked hard on it ourselves, worked hard to pay for what we had paid on it and hated losing it, but it wasn’t near as hard for us to start over. The help that the government gave us, which of course we appreciated very much, took
the sting out of it. I never have felt very bitter or anything like that toward the
government, which most people blame because the dam was not inspected correctly
while it was being built, or they built in a bad site. Whatever the reason was that it broke,
I don’t think that you can try to put the blame on anybody in particular; however, the
government assumed the blame so I think that this is what saved a lot of people from
nervous break downs, the help from the government. You hear about all these disasters
that other people have around the country and you really wonder what is going to happen
to those people because they were in the same kind of situation as us, and yet there is not
compensation as far as I know like we received in the Teton Dam disaster.

SF: After you left to go down south, when and why did you come back?

KF: Oh, there are several reasons for that. My wife was quite anxious to get back up
here to Rexburg to see her family and to help each other. One of the main reasons that
we got back up, I made several trips up, to find out what I could, what was going on and
what was being done and in those trips and talking with people and visiting the disaster
center areas, we became aware of the help that was coming and that was available to us,
and we were afraid we would miss out on these things and that we ought to be here. It
was rather difficult to find a place to stay, and this was one thing that kept us away as
long as it did. We were about a month away after the dam broke before we got back up
here and then we got into a college apartment after some people that had their HUD
trailer arrive and moved out into their trailer and so the apartment was available to us. In
fact, this was the aunt and uncle that warned us about the dam and that that lived next
doors to us, when they moved out of their apartment, we were able to move into theirs and
stay there until we got into our own HUD trailer.

SF: What did you call your HUD trailer?

KF: Well, we had all kinds of names for them, people really said a lot of bad things
about them, mostly it was in fun. People really appreciated those HUD trailers, and that’s
what we called them, HUD mobiles, HUD trailers, just a HUD. They had their
drawback, but they were a lot better than a tent or something else.

SF: Which group among church, federal, or state or whatever, which group gave you the
first assistance and the most assistance?

KF: I think that probably the group that helped us the most was the Red Cross. I was
amazed at the assistance the Red Cross gave to people. I had no idea they just gave thing
to people like they did. There was one bad thing about the Red Cross, just depended on
who was in charge of your case so to speak, who you interviewer was. If you had
somebody that wasn’t quite as generous as somebody else, you didn’t get near as much,
even somebody that had more children. As far as what my family received, I thought was
quite good for us, because we received several hundred dollars in the form of things to
buy clothes, beds, even food stamps.
SF: How did you feel about using food stamps, and how did you feel about getting assistance? Does it hurt your pride or anything?

KF: Well, I think it kind of did at first. Most people kinda had the idea that they would never have thing just outright given to them. We felt like we maybe shouldn’t take these things if we had some other route to take, but we had some assistance from family and friends, which was more than we had expected, but there was still the basic necessities of life that we needed to get started and eventually we could see everyone else taking it, and so we felt like we should too, just to try to get started again and have something to live on and to be able to dress our children. Course, I still had my income from the school teaching, and I wasn’t even sure that was going to continue because my school had been flooded, and so we were worried about that. And so we didn’t hesitate too long to take any assistance. As far as food stamps go, we hadn’t had any contact with the church. Our church had been flooded and so meetings weren’t held. In fact, we hadn’t been there because we had been further south for the last month. So we did take food stamps for the first time. Then in talking to people, the church had advised us not to take any more, so we took about one hundred dollars worth of food stamps. Then we qualified for another hundred dollars worth which we didn’t go get. But I felt it was coming from the government, and we had a lot of food storage that got lost and perhaps we were just cashing in on the money that we had invested in the government before so there was no question in my mind that we should take it.

SF: Why did the LDS church advise you not to take food stamps after that?

KF: I never did hear a very good reason for it, except that this was a government handout program and the welfare of the church was going to try to provide for the needs of its members. It wasn’t too long before the Bishop’s storehouse was set up in Rexburg on the Ricks College campus, and you could get what you needed there in the way of a lot of goods. Some people took advantage of that. In fact, we know of people that backed their car in and loaded up the trunk of their car with food items, much more than their share of what they really needed. Some of them got a year or maybe two maybe three years supply of some items through that program of the church. But, I think that was the main reason they wanted us to stick with the church program because that’s what it is for, and this was a government hand-out, and we were just being taught not take those hand-outs.

SF: How do you feel about standing in lines and waiting to get the form of relief?

KF: Well, like I said before, I think it was very different to have to just take things that were handed to you. I saw people that were rich that I knew had a lot of money that were in the same condition we were in with their handout; everyone was in the same boat. It was kind of different feeling seeing people like that with their handout the same as us who didn’t have a lot of money. I thought it was more of just a time that you had to put in. I guess I didn’t feel bad about it after there was so many involved in this, so many people had to have this on such a large scale, people eating the meals free at the college and things like that. We did feel kind of guilty about that because we soon had an apartment where we could cook our own food so we hardly ever ate up at the college.
And when my school checks came in, we cut that off completely because we felt like that should be given to people that needed more than us that had their income wiped out.

SF: Do you think there was sense of unity or group or community feeling that has been strengthened by the disaster itself?

KF: Oh, I think that there is a definite feeling of that throughout the city of Rexburg and throughout the community. People helped each other, all kinds of stories of people coming in from out of town to help. But everyone was in the same boat and the same situation and had the same type of thing happen to them. They soon realized that there’s nothing to do but try to make the most of it, and I think there was an unified effort. The church especially played an important role in that, in keeping people informed of what was the best road to take in regards to assistance, and getting back on their feet.

SF: Was the morale of the people high at all times or did they feel depression?

KF: I think many people felt depression. For instance, my in-laws, my wife’s parents, had a beautiful new brick home that they had been into three years and worked hard all their life to get. They saw it sail across the highway and disintegrate practically. They never found any of it and all of the work that they had done, for instance, genealogy that my wife’s mother had done, years and years of work. They had volume after volume of books that they lost completely that they had saved all of their lives. The effect on them was definitely sometimes to give up, but it seemed like with having children and knowing that you had to provide for them, things like this, people’s morale usually bounced back. But there were a lot of people, older people, that gave up a little bit. Some of them even left the country and went to other states or other communities to live because they were in despair; they didn’t want any part of this area anymore. But, for the most part, I think the morale was good, probably the main reason for that was the tremendous amount of help that was brought in, not only by the federal government, but by the church, and other religion groups as well. I remember one time out when I was down surveying my lot, my acre, where there was nothing but broken up cement left and twisted concrete, some people stopped. A guy that had a beard came over to me and asked me if there was anything at all that they could do, any clean-up, anything at all that they could do. They introduced themselves as Mennonites, and I was quite shocked and surprised that people came from different parts of the country to help people like this. I had no idea that there were groups like this that came that far to help. This helped the morale of the people I’m sure. Literally bus load after bus load of LDS workers came in to help people. They came in by the hundreds. In fact, there were so many at times they had a hard time finding things for them to do after a lot of the cleanup had taken place.

SF: With the initial shock of the flood, was the reaction of the people one of hysteria or sadness or what really hit them, the people that were around you?

KF: The day of the flood, I remember seeing people in tears on the hill there around me, some of them screaming as their house floated by. There goes your house or there goes my house they would say. People could see it happen. There wasn’t a lot of that I don’t
think because people really couldn’t tell what had happened to their house ‘til they got back down into the flood area itself and then they were able to survey the situation. Then I think people felt at a lost and cried and morale was quite low immediately right after. It was a tremendous shock because as I said before, there was no idea how bad this was until you were able to go down and see what had happened, and what had taken place. Just seeing the water spread out across the valley was hard unless you actually saw your house floating and what had happened to your home.

SF: Did you feel that the assistance provided by the government was immediate and helpful or was a lot of paper work that seemed unnecessary?

KF: Under the circumstances, at the time, I felt like that things could have been handled a lot better. But I look back on that now and see that there couldn’t have been too much more done than there was done at the time. The main thing that people had trouble with was they had questions about what they were to do and what they could do, and those questions couldn’t be answered immediately because there had to be a bill signed by the President after it passed both houses of Congress providing for relief to compensate people for their damages. And until that passed, most of the words of advice and wisdom that the government agencies and others could give us was that they would do for us what they could for our immediate needs. That’s the words that the Red Cross always used, “These are to help you with your immediate needs until other things could be decided.” We felt at the time like we were being put off and didn’t know what to do. I remember one of my fellow teachers at Sugar-Salem High School where I taught and where I now teach, I saw her in one of the lines, and she was at moment in the depths of despair, and she just kept saying to me “What are we going to do? What are we going to do?” I have never forgotten that because that was the feeling of people that they didn’t know what they were going to do, they just had no [idea] what their future was going to be.

SF: What was the biggest problem that confronted you and your family and as you began to move back in?

KF: Well, we didn’t really have too much of a problem. I think that the main problem that we were concerned about was whether or not I was going to have a job, whether the school was going to go back into operation, because if it wasn’t, I didn’t know where my income was going to come from. That was one of the main concerns that I had. The people were very helpful, and we had received more of the needs that we needed in the way of food and clothes, but again this was a concern. We were all out of everything so we had to start the long road of building that supply up again, and we were still in the process of doing that right now. But that was my main concern. Then, of course, we were living in a college apartment, we were concerned about what would happen to us if the college was going to have to start before we could get into our HUD trailer, which we had ordered. This was our main concern, where we would live for a short time. I don’t know if the college would have kicked us out or what, so we were really in a thither about that, but things worked out fine because we were able to move out before the college kids came in.
SF: What motivated you to remain in the area and start again?

KF: This might sound calloused I guess, after we found that there was going to a compensation for what we had lost, this of course had to be one of the main motivations, try to get back on our feet financially. We had a huge home loan, which we didn’t think they were just going to wipe off the book and say, “Hey, you can forget your loan.” So we needed to take care of financial dealings, plus the fact I soon found that there was going to be an effort made to put the school back together, and I had signed a contract to teach school that year. I felt like at the time it would have been very difficult for them to hire someone to come in and teach under the circumstances, not knowing for sure when they would start, where they would live, even if they would have a school. It would have been very difficult to replace teachers that first year in the flood because of the circumstances.

SF: Tell me a little bit about your age and your family and how big they are and how many children and so forth.

KF: We just had our third baby a little over a month before the dam broke, we have a boy that is now four who would have been just around three when the dam broke, and a little girl who was two. We now have a fourth child, who has just been born, and I’m thirty-one years of age and my wife is twenty-nine.

SF: How did you children react? You mentioned a little bit about it. Is there anything in the aftermath of it that they talk about the flood or how they play?

KF: My little boy remembers it quite well. I don’t think my little girl, the second oldest remembers much about it. My little boy has a vivid memory anyway, and he talks about it somewhat if it’s brought up, he doesn’t bring it up much himself. When we talk about certain things that he had or he sees something in the way of toys, an item that he had before the flood, he’ll say often times that this is something that he had that got flooded. He is quite aware that the dam broke, and he often says the word Teton Dam, or will say that only word that you can use when you say dam, is that you can say the Teton Dam. So that seems to stand out in his mind quite a bit. [There are] a lot of children around the neighborhood in different areas that played Teton Dam. They would build up a dirt mound and then let the water from the hose or from a small stream build up and let it break through and have a little flood in their own mind. This was something that I heard quite a bit went on. A lot of kids around played this kind of game. My boy also was quite concerned whether or not Santa Claus would be able to come to his house because he no longer had a house. He has mentioned this to his grandmother and to my wife several times, and he did after the flood.

SF: Have there been any unusual experiences that happened to other people that stand out in your mind?

KF: Probably one of the most unusual that I’ve heard of in all of the area of the flood, happened to my wife’s grandfather. He lost a cow herd in the flood, but three weeks after
the flood they were getting some railroad cars that had been washed in, tipped over or something, and three head of these cattle were either in this railroad car when it tipped over or when it flooded. Anyway, they were still there and still alive after three weeks when they were still cleaning up. They found these cattle very thin, barely alive. One of them eventually died, but the other two lived to tell about it.

There’s a couple of other things. The different sights that you would see, homes tilted at very odd angles, trees inside people’s homes, horses and cows inside people’s homes, cows bloated, dead animals on Main Street. We saw one hooked around a stop sign. You would see them everywhere, animals everywhere, it was a very ghastly looking sight sometimes. One unusual thing that happened [in] regards to my own personal items, I found my hunting knife underneath my driveway cement, about a foot underneath where it had been bowed up by the water and left a gaping hole there in the ground and there my hunting knife was. It had been in the basement, I believe in my home, before the flood or else it was in one of the cupboards, and this seemed unusual to me.

SF: Now, you’re a history teacher at Sugar-Salem High School, aren’t you?

KF: Yes.

SF: How, as a historian then, how do you think the Teton Dam disaster affected the area? Think of it in historical terms. How did it affect the people and the history of the Rexburg area?

KF: I think that the experience that people had with the dam breaking has left an impression on people’s minds so that in regards to building dams anyway, that they will never want to make that type of mistake again. Whether or not the dam is rebuilt is still a question. Most people think that it will not. But economically, it has helped this area. I think now there are more people living here now than there was before the flood. It made in impact economically in the area, I think that it inflated quite a bit the price in regards to building thing. I think that there are some personal histories of people that will be forever lost because of the land being washed away and farms that were destroyed in the dam disaster. I believe that that’s more the way that I looked at it. People looked to improve things after we were advised to build back better. I think that most people have taken that, some have even taken it too literally and probably built back too expensive and they probably could have managed. Overall, I think the dam disaster has improved the area. It has somewhat unified the people, but I think that unification will wear off a little bit as time goes on. People won’t remember it quite as vividly. Even now in driving through the area, you can’t hardly tell there was a flood.

SF: I know you mentioned to me, some of the older people that are in trouble because they built too big and expensive a home. Is that the case?

KF: I don’t think that’s very common, but I think it has happened. I’ve heard of a few people in Sugar City that, I don’t know, if they knew what their taxes would be like or what it would cost to rear a home like that, but some people definitely put more money
back into a home that they did other things. So it’s going to make it a little bit difficult for them when they got their tax notices of what their taxes will be on those places. Taxes were high enough in Madison County before, and this is going to be a hardship on some people.

SF: Ken, the last question I’d like to put to you and perhaps you could put a little thought into it, has the flood personally affected your own life?

KF: Well, this is kind of a hard question to answer. I’ve learned a lot from the flood and I’ve learned a tremendous amount about people, but as far as changing my life, my life right now is practically the same as it was before the flood. They talked about restoring things to us. I think that a good job has been done of that. People have been able to restore things quite well. We’ve lost things that we can never replace. But the thing that I learned was the generosity, the help of my family, friends, church, the government gave us will never be forgotten by me or my family because we were helpless for a time. We were in a situation where we had to have help. There was nothing that we could do for ourselves very much. This is something that will never be forgotten among my family and among many others I’m sure as well. We’ve learned lessons about disasters too. You know what’s important to save if anything like this should happen again. You know what’s important to save if anything like this should happen again. You hear about earthquakes and fires and things like that, if you had time, what kind of things to save. If people that were in the Teton Dam Flood were to have another disaster, I’m sure that they would know more what they would want to save and try to get out what would be important to them. This is something that I’ve learned, I think, from the flood.

SF: Well, thank you very much.