The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Lillie D. Widdison – Life during the Teton Flood

By Lillie D. Widdison

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Box 9 Folder 14

Oral Interview conducted by Ramon Widdison

Transcript copied by David Garmon   September 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
RW: What is your full name?

LW: Lillie Dareta Hemsley Widdison.

RW: Will you spell it?


RW: How old are you?

LW: I am sixty-three, will be sixty-four in October.

RW: Where were you when you first heard about the dam breaking?

LW: We were in Rexburg Food Center. We were just ready to check out some groceries. Just before this I had said to my husband, Garr, “I’ve got to run over to the Kentucky Fried Chicken and get a barrel of chicken,” because we were going to go out and surprise Ramon and David which are on a Boy Scout hike, on the fifty-mile hike. I think it will be fun to have some Kentucky Fried Chicken and I had picked up some oranges and some apples and a few grapes and I said, “While you’re checking these out I’ll pick up the chicken.” So I went over there and I came back just in time to hear on the radio, a person said over the loud speaker, saying, “The Teton Dam has broke.” I looked at Garr and he looked at me. I said, “Oh, we’ve got to find Ramon, we’ve got to go get Ramon.” I forgot about being sick, which I had been sick all week or anything else. He said, “No, you are too sick to go clear out there.” I said, “No, I’m going to go hunt my son. He’ll be at St. Anthony and maybe in Sugar and I cannot be satisfied until I find him.” So we went and just jumped in the car. We didn’t know how bad anything was and we started for Kilgore. We knew that was their destination. We ran out. I never had seen Garr drive so fast out there. We turned around at Kilgore and hadn’t found them. On our way back we met a man and his son and he said they had seen a Scout Master and a boy setting on a rock. The man acted like he had been hurt. I said, “Oh, that’s Ramon, I wonder what’s happened.” He said, “I think they have gone back, but the other man and son went on.” So we came back towards Rexburg. I didn’t see any sign of any water whatsoever. I seen a couple of women out watering the lawns and a man hoeing his garden and the cattle out in the field. Everything seemed too peaceful. We ran into the house and Garr grabbed the two suitcases and I grabbed the telephone to call Ramon. There was no answer. After there was no answer I became scared again, afraid that we had missed him. I said, “Oh, he’s not home, what should we do?” Garr said, “We can’t go back, it’s too close.” Then the radio announcer said, “It’s entering Rexburg, you’ve only got a few minutes to get to Rexburg, do not pick up anything. The water is too close.” And he kept telling us over and over again, not to pick up any belongings whatsoever. I said to Garr, “Grab my red suit while you grab your suitcase.” So he grabbed the two suitcases and my red suit and out the door he went and put them in the white car. He told me to go to the road and wait for him while he loaded up the three-wheeler in the El Camino. While he was doing this, I was staying there, also in a lot of pain, but I didn’t take my medicine, all I could think of is Ramon. I was still worried. I
didn’t know where he was. I waited for Garr a few minutes. A man came by and hollered, “Come Dareta you only have three minutes to get to town.” I said, “I’ll be there.” He went on down to the corner, he hollered back, “Please Dareta, come, come on.” Once again, I told him that I was going to wait for Garr. “Do not wait for him,” he said, “it’s close, it’s very close.” Garr drove by then and I followed him to town. Just as we got to town we seen the water on the very edge of Main Street. We went up to the college and I went and told my boss at the Ricks College which I had been working for that I had come to work. He looked at me and said, “Well, Dutch, you can’t work, you look like you need to be in bed, go home. Oh, I don’t mean go home, go somewhere and go to bed. You look just awful.” I said, “Well, I’m still sick but I can help cook for all this crowd.” He said, “Come back at five o’clock.” So we went up to Garr’s brother’s, Howard Widdison’s place, and I took a couple of pills, layed down and by five o’clock came, I knew I couldn’t go back and help work. I didn’t go back. After awhile, we all went up on the hill and we watched the city become flooded and we looked out toward Hibbard and it seemed like one side of the road was absolutely covered with water and then on the other side it all came together, just met, a big, big stream and no houses, no trees, you couldn’t see anything, it was so deep. All I could think of was my little dog that I had set on the step and told him that I would be back after him, and wondered what was to become of him. When I had to go to the college, I had called Ramon’s place and got Ramon and found out that he had been out home hunting me and I’d been hunting him. So there we were both worried about each other and then the phone went dead up at the college. Nobody was able to get anything through. The lines were all dead. Then we stayed at Howard’s all night and Cliffton Muir came by. And he said he had been in an airplane and he flew over our place and he told us our place was gone, and Homer Taylor’s place was gone. He told us a lot of places in Hibbard that was absolutely ruined and we didn’t know if we had a home or not. Sunday, we drove up the street—I forgot the name of the little street we went on—but on this lane there was a bunch of trees and in these trees were a bunch of rubbish and it was real high, as high as the trees and there set a cow on top of all of these trees. She looked like she was just as comfortable as she could be but yet, the water was clear up and she was caught in all of this rubbish. I said, “How will that poor thing get down?” Garr said, “Well, somebody will come and get her down.” Then we went back. Monday morning came and Garr and Leland and Howard was coming out and we came through Rexburg, came out on the highway and there set four or five trailers on the highway and boats, and dead cattle in the middle there as you turn to come out to Hibbard there. There were cattle that were dead. The highway was cut into great big pieces and big blocks. It looked like an earthquake had hit rather than a flood. On the side there were great big holes. We couldn’t come on to the bridge. They said the bridge was washed out. Two or three of the neighbors started rolling their pants up to walk on to see if their place was alright. Garr said, “You better not walk on because you don’t look like you could take it.” Well, I didn’t feel good enough to walk through all of that water. So we went back to Howard’s and we didn’t know whether these other couples went on. Monday morning came by and our neighbor man said he would take us through. There was a big hole in the road, real deep, cars could go through it with a four-wheel-drive, but we couldn’t go through it with the El Camino. He said, “I’ll take you through with this four-wheel-drive. So he brought me home, to the gate and you could hardly see the house for rubbish and trees that had washed in. But the
house was still standing although it had about, I imagine about three feet of water clear up to the doors around it. Then there was a big tree and Garr gathered a big plank and made a plank from one of these trees on to the step of the door which he carried me through this water. He had hip boots on and set me down on the step of the door. I came on into the house. It was a terrible site to see the floors covered with mud. Every room was a complete wreck. Garr had been out Sunday night and cleaned some of the dirt out of the kitchen and I didn’t even know that he had cleaned any because it was so muddy and still deep. The bathroom, it was terrible. The smell, was something awful. Howard came out at five o’clock and took me back into town and as I got back into town there, my daughter’s husband was there and he said, “I am taking you back to the Falls, so you can have your doctor appointment.” I said, “No, you can’t talk on the telephone or anything you can hear anybody, I don’t see any sense in me going to the doctor, I’ll stay home. Anyway, I’m not going.” “Garr’s not home,” my son-in-law said, “you’re going,” so I went with him. I went to the doctor and then I was put in the hospital with a heart attack. So far, I never saw any more of the flood. To me it was a terrible thing to happen and see all of these animals that I did see dead on the highway. Let’s let Garr tell you now what he thought of the flood.