The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Robert Worrell – Life during the Teton Flood

By Robert Worrell

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Box 9 Folder 17

Oral Interview conducted by Richard Stallings

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
RS: Robert, will you spell your last name?

RW: W-O-R-R-E-L-L.

RS: Where were you born?

RW: I was born in St. Anthony, Idaho.

RS: How long have you lived in Sugar City?

RW: About ten years.

RS: Well, Bob, today we want to take some time and talk about the Teton Dam collapse. Where were you living at the time of the flood?

RW: We were living in Sugar City.

RS: What was your address there?

RW: 113 South Fremont Avenue.

RS: I see, now are you living in the same place?

RW: Yes.

RS: What do you do for a living?

RW: I teach at Ricks College.

RS: And you’ve lived in this area, you say, about ten year[s].

RW: Yes.

RS: Did you own your home?

RW: Yes, we did.

RS: And what are your feelings when they started talking about building the dam?

RW: I had mixed feelings, I liked fishing on the Teton River, but I felt like it was a worthy sacrifice to have a nice reservoir there, full of water.

RS: Did your or any of your family have premonitions about this impending disaster?

RW: Nothing directly, but I do recall us saying to each other, several times, neither my wife or I felt like we were going to be living in that house very long. We never knew
why, or what we might do, but we mentioned it to each other many times. Then, of course, we are not living in the same house, so maybe that was some premonition.

RS: Where were you and your family when the dam collapsed?

RW: We were home, working in the yard.

RS: I see, just sort of taking care of the daily chores. What was your first reaction when you heard the dam had failed?

RW: Well, it was one of disbelief to begin with, but it didn’t take us very long to come to the realization that we needed to leave.

RS: Did you have any idea of the type, or the magnitude that the collapse would bring?

RW: It took a while for me to realize what was really happening. The announcer on the radio, of course, motivated us to leave with his enthusiasm, and then later on I began to realize what was really happening.

RS: How were you made aware that the dam had broken? Did you hear it on the radio or…?

RW: No, one of our neighbors came by on a bicycle. Her husband worked at the dam, and he’d phoned and told her, and she was going around warning all the neighbors.

RS: Did you try to save any household or personal belongings?

RW: Yes, in a way. We set our pictures and our important papers up high on the refrigerator. Of course, that didn’t do any good. But we did try to get stuff up out of the water.

RS: Did you take anything with you, when you left?

RW: No, I think it was something of a psychological reaction to the announcer on the radio. He was saying, “Don’t take anything, just leave.” And even though we had an empty trunk in the car, we didn’t take anything.

RS: How much time did you have?

RW: Oh, actually we would have had an hour from the time we heard, but we didn’t know how long it would be. I didn’t want to wait around and find out.

RS: Did you see the flood coming?

RW: Not until we were safe up on the hill here, and had been there for some time.
RS: Did you make preparations around the place as you left?

RW: It is kind of interesting when something like that happens what kind of preparation you do make. We had some discussion on which car we should take; finally chose the Buick because it was larger. And as we left, I noticed that someone had left the Volkswagen door open, so I went back and shut it before we left.

RS: I see. Did you turn off the power? Did you make sure the lights were off? Doors were all locked securely?

RW: We did lock the doors, I didn’t turn off the power. That was probably an oversight there. I should have done that.

RS: Now, in vacating the area, did anything unusual happen, were you very cool, rounding up the children, putting them in the…?

RW: Yes, I think so. We naturally had a little feeling of excitement. We knew that something was happening and weren’t quite sure what it was. We did think of our neighbors, however, and checked with several of them to make sure that they were warned. And then we stopped and picked up an elderly lady and her granddaughter who we knew who had no other means to leave.

RS: Now, I should have asked this earlier, I suppose, how large a family do you have?

RW: We have four children.

RS: So that when you left, what did you do?

RW: Well, we got in the car, went and picked up our neighbor and then we headed for the hill. We needed to get to high ground.

RS: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with this?

RW: Nothing spectacular, I suppose. Like parting of the Red Sea. I think the main miracle was that all of us got out of it safely.

RS: Now, where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood?

RW: We stayed at Ricks College the first night. And then we went up through Teton and down through Felt and Drummond and stayed with my wife’s folks then for a couple of weeks.

RS: And that became your residence while you were cleaning up?

RW: Yes, till we found a place to stay here in Rexburg.
RS: Where was that?

RW: We stayed on Fourth South, south of the highway.

RS: You weren’t then involved with the HUD trailers.

RW: No.

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

RW: We got in Monday, after the flood. My dad brought a pickup down and we walked about five miles from the north side of Sugar City.

RS: What was your first reaction when you viewed the destruction?

RW: Well, Dad and I both had the same reaction. When I was a boy at home, I read a science fiction novel about the destruction of the world and how desolate it was when the last man walked out across the plains. Both of us thought of that book that we had read at the same time. We felt the same way. It was just desolate.

RS: What kind of things did you notice? What stood out as you entered your own general area?

RW: The thing that probably the strongest feeling in my mind was that I was lost. I couldn’t tell where I was, cause everything was changed.

RS: Did you have trouble finding your home?

RW: Just a little disorientation. I found it alright because I knew which street it was on. Generally, you know which direction to go. The surroundings were very unfamiliar at first.

RS: Do you remember the thoughts that went through your mind as you viewed your property for the first time?

RW: Well, I suppose I was numb. I didn’t think really too much about it. There was not grief, no regrets. I knew it was settled in my mind that there wasn’t anything left and that anything that we found was some token that was left, that’s all.

RS: Did you have any hope in your mind that you would be repaid, or taken care of your loss or did you just feel that this was it?

RW: I never really even considered that that was a possibility. I suppose that taking care of the immediate needs was basic concern. I was maybe concerned about what we are going to do later.
RS: Now you spent a day of the flood here at Ricks College campus, what went through your mind as you looked out and saw the water, the destruction, at least from a distance?

RW: It’s rather strange, I was talking to one of my neighbors and my main concern was, Well, there goes Sugar City. As we saw the water come in, we knew there wasn’t anything left or at least felt that everything had been destroyed. My only thought was, well, I’ve got what is most important to me here, and that was my family. Afterwards, we talked to the children, we told them that everything was gone. Of course, they were concerned about their little bird. They had a parakeet that talked to them. He knew some phrases, and they were really concerned about him. I tried to explain to them that he was dead, there was nothing they could do about it, and that Heavenly Father watches out for little birds like he does anyone else and quoted to them the scripture about how a sparrow doesn’t fall unless our Father in Heaven knows about it. It’s interesting that when we went back into the house, there was only one piece of furniture standing in the entire house. Most of the walls were caved in—the house had moved about 150 yards away from the foundation and everything was either gone or turned upside-down except one bunk bed, and that is where they had set the bird and he was alive and well when we got there.

RS: That is incredible! On the campus the day of the flood, it was almost a carnival atmosphere; young people sitting out listening to radios, sunning themselves, other people out there talking and joking—did you share this feeling?

RW: Yes, I think we took it with a rather light heart. I don’t think anyone really felt like anything of a tragedy had happened. I think we all pretty much took it calmly that all our worldly possessions had been taken away, but we still had our lives and our families and that is what was important.

RS: What was the damage you suffered as a result of the flood?

RW: Well, everything we owned of any value at all was taken away. We went back and found a few things. Most of what we collected had to be thrown away later, however. Anything that had got into the water was completely ruined.

RS: What was the most cherished item that you lost?

RW: Well, I think for all of us it was our photographs, all the children’s pictures from the time they were little infants until now. That is, of course, something that can’t be replaced.

RS: Nothing of material value then that you thought was…?

RW: No, never really regretted the loss of anything of a material nature. There was nothing that we felt couldn’t be replaced in time. Even before we knew we would be reimbursed for the damage.
RS: What I am trying to get at, what were you thinking about as you and your father hiked into your home? Did you have any ideas that the home might still be standing? Did you know what to expect?

RW: No, I really didn’t. One of the neighbors had been in the day before and had reported that he didn’t see our house there and I had assumed that it had collapsed and had gone. I didn’t know what to expect. I did expect my machine shop to be there. It was a fairly sturdy cinderblock building, well-reinforced, but it had been completely wiped out. Water hit it so hard that it completely collapsed the walls and left the roof sitting there on the foundation. It had hung up and stayed there. There was nothing else there. I don’t know really what I had expected to find. I knew that I had to go in and see it. I think that was all, just to confirm the loss.

RS: Were you concerned, was that something that you would rather not do, I mean to go in and see if your place…?

RW: Oh no. I wanted to see it. I guess it was some kind of morbid curiosity, like going to go see an old friend at a viewing, you know. You really don’t want to but you know you have to.

RS: But then there was greater destruction than even you had anticipated?

RW: Oh yes, it was ten times greater than I had thought to begin with.

RS: How did you go about cleaning up the property?

RW: Oh, there wasn’t much to clean up. Our property had been swept clean. I was practically ready to build on, except for the old foundation which had to be removed. That was the main cleanup project we had, was to get somebody to dig the foundation out so that we could start to rebuild.

RS: Alright now, did you receive any help in working on your property, in getting it back into shape?

RW: Oh yes, my family came down. My dad and uncle and cousin, my brother-in-law all came down and helped me to gather up what we could. There were a few items that the flood hadn’t damaged, up high in closets and things like that. A few items of furniture that we tried to salvage but, of course, most of them weren’t any good anyway.

RS: Did you have any unusual of uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

RW: I think the most uplifting thing, as I look back on it, was the association we had with other members of the community. I have never felt any closer to any group of people in my life than I felt at that time. We were all in the same boat, all reduced to the same social level. It was great to have the fellowship and association with our neighbors.
RS: Did you suffer from any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

RW: Well, there wasn’t much for them to take, but I did notice about the third day after we started working around there doing what we could, that somebody took the electrical boxes, the breaker, and our electrical equipment from off the side of the house. I had intended to do that and hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Somebody beat me to it.

RS: You say your house was moved about 150 yards off the foundation, was it still sitting on your property then?

RW: No, it was across the street and on our neighbor’s property.

RS: Now, what were your feelings, did you have hopes of maybe moving it back onto your lot? Starting from that structure? Or did you realize that it was a total loss?

RW: No, it was quite obviously a total loss. All the outside walls had pretty well collapsed. The inside walls were all that were holding it together. The inside walls and the floor. Everything else was pretty much gone.

RS: At this point, what plans did you and your wife make? Were you planning to rebuild, or leave the area, or what?

RW: Well, the first few thought that we had were, of course, we’d go find us some place to live around where there was still a house to live in. We thought, of course, of moving out of the community. We felt some obligation after we knew that we would get some compensation for our loss to move back and rebuild in the place we had been before. We even thought that if we should move later, that we still have the obligation to go back and do what we could to put it back into shape.

RS: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood, say within the first three of four days?

RW: Of course, they set up a Disaster Center which gave help to those who needed it. Our main help came from the Red Cross, the first immediate help. Then, of course, the LDS Church Welfare Program. We did get food from them and some clothing and coats for the children. As you recall, it was rather cold right after that and we did get some coats, some shoes, things like that…

RS: I guess that is a real feeling of poverty, when everything is taken?

RW: Yes. I suppose that was a good experience for us because we have trouble accepting charity and we all had to humble ourselves and accept what was given. That was all. We went to the Welfare Center and we picked out things as we accepted it graciously and ate meals at the Manwaring Center when we were there. We were glad for it. I think it was a great experience.
RS: You mentioned you received some assistance from the Red Cross, any other private or independent organizations step in here?

RW: None besides the Church that we accepted help from. We felt like we received enough assistance and that there wasn’t any need for that.

RS: Now, as you start your recovery, what government agencies did you deal with?

RW: Well, we dealt with the Bureau of Reclamation, of course, and well, I guess that was the main one.

RS: How would you evaluate their effectiveness?

RW: Well, I thought they were rather gracious and very helpful. I have no criticism at all or either of them of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I think that those people came in here and did with great patience what they had to do. I was really impressed by the effectiveness of our government agencies to do the job.

RS: Did you change your attitude towards government bureaucrats and bureaucracies?

RW: Well, yes, as a matter of fact. I’d always felt rather patriotic, but that certainly strengthened my patriotism and love of my country.

RS: Did you have any dealings with county and state authorities?

RW: Only as we had cleanup, of course, we went through the Civil Defense and county officials. We dealt with them some. Not a great deal.

RS: Would you evaluate their effectiveness?

RW: I think they did a good job. I am amazed, frankly, that a year after this disaster happened you can see very little evidence around the county of what happened and I am sure that it is the leaders in the community that were mostly responsible for this.

RS: Now, without using names, do you feel that any of those who assisted in recovery operations took advantage of you or of the government? People maybe getting a lot of money without really earning it?

RW: Well, we were a little upset at some of the wages that the government offered for people to come in because, of course, it was a little out of our wage structure. I felt like possibly that might upset our economy around here. That was the only thing. I don’t feel that anyone unduly took advantage of the government. The wages were offered and you can’t blame a person for taking a job if he can make money.

RS: Ok, again without the use of names, were you aware of anyone who filed fraudulent claims?
RW: No, I wasn’t aware of anyone.

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

RW: Well, I have to agree with what Boyd Packer said when he spoke here that God didn’t cause the dam to collapse, but one it was inevitable then, certainly, divine intervention was there. I feel that it had to be because of all the stories I’ve heard of how people got out of there. They were warned and they left.

RS: So that perhaps the intervention then was in postponing the flood, or holding the waters till the middle of the Saturday afternoon?

RW: Yes, certainly there would have been thousand killed if it had come seven or eight hours earlier.

RS: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt?

RW: Oh, I have mixed feelings about that. I think we certainly need it for irrigation. The farmers, at least, see a great need for the storage water. I think we need it for hydroelectric power. For this reason, I was for it. In that way, it destroyed some sentimental things as they put it in. I hated to see the canyon changed like that because it was kind of a special place to me, but I feel like the benefit of it would have been greater. I don’t know now, what to think. Certainly I am sure they won’t make the same mistake twice.

RS: Should they build it in the same place?

RW: Well, that is not for me to answer. I couldn’t really make any recommendations there because I don’t know what the structure of the rock there was like. Part of the blame for the collapse has been blamed on the location. Maybe it should be moved.

RS: How has the disaster changed your life?

RW: Well, I think it made it a little easier to get along with material things, we don’t worry so much about our material possessions anymore. We have more than we have ever had before. It is just a natural consequence, when you’ve got everything new. We don’t have more in quantity than we had. We have more in quality.

RS: What do you see as the condition of the community a year later? Was it a worthwhile disaster?

RW: Yes, I think in many ways it was. We always benefit by things that put us under stress and make us work against opposition. That is part of the purpose of life I guess. I feel that we have been strengthened by it. Probably not to the point that I think we would notice it; kind of in subtle ways. Changes in personality, the way we approach problems, the patience that we have possibly. But I think in these ways, spiritual ways, we have
been blessed by it. I think in material ways that we have been blessed. At least our community will be new and clean. That what is there now we put there with our own hands. Naturally we received aid to do that, but the government didn’t build the houses, they haven’t landscaped the yards, they haven’t planted the trees, and the shrubs and the lawn and the gardens, this is what we have all had to do ourselves. Many are building their own homes. So just in the labor we have had to perform, I think it has been a worthwhile thing.

RS: Did you build your own home?

RW: I helped. My brother-in-law built it actually, but I did all I could.

RS: You are back in it now and everything is pretty well normal?

RW: We are living there and things are getting back to normal rather rapidly. I think the yard in the only thing left now that really needs a lot of work.

RS: How would you evaluate your community, Sugar City, is it pretty well back in shape now?

RW: Well, there are still many things that need to be done. The streets, of course, are atrocious and need to be fixed. They will be done, I understand, about the last of July. The houses that have been built now are beautiful homes, but the yards and gardens still need to be taken care of. There is still a lot of the external work to do.

RS: What will the community be like five or six years down the road?

RW: I anticipate that anyone who wants to see how to build a community will come to Sugar City to see the example. I really feel that. I think it is going to be a beautiful place.

RS: Are we over building?

RW: You mean building too large, too many? Well, I don’t think we are building too many. One home per family I think is adequate. One business per businessman and there are new people moving in and building and you can’t blame them for doing that. There are a few places that stand out. They get a lot of publicity but most people I think are moving back rather modestly.

RS: Bob, what is your family situation now a year later? Have you noticed anything negative, any traits with the kids that you can relate to the flood?

RW: Oh, yes. Our youngest daughter still has nightmares and whenever the wind blows she goes into a panic. They talk nothing but dams and disasters and floods and earthquakes and things like that. It is foremost in their minds. I am sure it has changed them mentally. They have a tendency to dwell on spectacular things like that.
RS: Do you think it will be permanent?

RW: No, I don’t think so. As a matter of fact, I think it may be good for them as they grow up to have that kind of experience in their background.

RS: Is there anything else regarding the flood that you would like to comment on?

RW: No, I think we have pretty well covered the material?

Robert and Bonnie Worrell and Family

Experiences of June 5, 1976

The spring of 1976 was a long-sought-for high point in the lives of our family. After eight years of remodeling and saving we had finally acquired a storage room and a two-year’s supply of the most essential food items. What little money we had extra had purchased some nice material with which we learned from experience how to cover our old worn furniture. A bit of industry, in a few summers, had transformed a weed patch and junk yard into an attractive back yard with shrubs, trees, and playground surround by a six-foot board fence. This spring was particularly special because we had been busy following the counsel of the prophet to clean up and beautify our property. We had added a rock garden with a birdbath and flowers of all kinds were growing around the house and along the fence. We had also doubled the size of our vegetable garden, adding room for strawberries, raspberries, rhubarb, gooseberries and currants. We planted extra early, putting hot caps over the tenderest plants to give them a head start. By the first of June the cucumbers and tomatoes had almost overgrown the hot caps, promising an abundant harvest in the fall.

With all the yard work caught up for once, we had promised ourselves that this year we would not allow ourselves to become involved in any time-consuming projects, but would spend more time doing things together as a family that we had always put off before. Only one thing remained to be done, and that was to trim and straighten the lawn at the edges of the gravel driveway. This one Saturday, June 5, we decided to spend on the yard before all the exciting things we had planned. I had thought of taking my son fishing also if time permitted, but one look at the Teton River was sufficient to tell that the water was much too muddy for the fish to bite. But that didn’t matter because it was probably the warmest, most beautiful day of the whole year—a most pleasant one to spend at home together. Even the children had remained in the yard and were playing pleasantly while Bonnie and I manicured the edges of the lawn.

Only minutes before the noon whistle blew at the city hall, Marilyn Short, a neighbor whose husband worked at the Teton Dam, rode up on her bicycle. She spoke calmly so that her words did not take effect for several minutes. “I hate to be the one to bring the bad news. The Teton Dam has broken. Ray called and said to tell everybody to
get out of town quick.” She suggested that we turn on the radio, then rode on down the street. Numbly we turned toward the house. Calling the children around us, we felt the first surge of panic as we heard the radio announcer shouting excitedly: “The Teton Dam has broken! Don’t stop to save anything! Just get in your car and leave. Get out as fast as you can.” Shaking now with excitement but trying to remain composed we knelt down with the children to ask for the Lord’s protection. After a few quick phone calls to make sure other neighbors were warned, we drove by to pick up Fay Henderson, a widow lady on my home teaching beat, and her six-year-old granddaughter. Then we joined the long line of traffic headed for high ground on Rexburg hill.

For an hour we waited there by the Ricks College farmhouse with crowds of refugees, some solemn, other joking. Only as we listened to the radio did we begin to realize what was happening, but by then it was too late to return for the family photographs and other keepsakes we had set on the kitchen cabinet or the children’s pet parakeet they had put on the top bunk bed. About twenty minutes before two p.m. someone with field glasses spotted the water. It became visible first by the great cloud of dust being raised in front of it. Soon a long brown line stretched along the northern horizon and began to spread across the valley. At ten minutes before two (a time we confirmed by a clock we dug out of the mud) the trees of Sugar City were surrounded by water but we could only guess what had happened to the houses. As the water moved into Rexburg bringing trees, cars and entire houses with it, our guesses became more accurate.

The rest of the weekend we were still in shock as we moved slowly through the chow lines at the Manwaring Center and found a bed at the dorms. Sunday afternoon we started through the dry farms to see if we could make it to Ashton where my parents live. Through all of the excitement the main concern of our children was their parakeet, Willy, a unique little personality who said “Practice your piano, Jessica,” as a reminder to our oldest daughter. As we drove toward Teton Basin they again expressed anxiety over their pet. Knowing from reports that our house was gone, I explained as gently as I could that he was dead now and it was not use to fret. As we pursued the subject the scripture came to my mind that not even a sparrow should fall to the ground without the notice of Heavenly Father. I said that He had protected us, that He knew what had happened to their little pet, and that everything would be alright. They mentioned the subject only two or three times after that, but I resolved, if it were in my power, to find the remains and return them for proper burial.

Monday morning early Dad and I started for Sugar City. As we traveled south I was astonished to see several miles of railroad track twisted up and flung a quarter-mile into the field. Roof-tops, large farm vehicles, and great piles of debris were scattered at random over the landscape. Our ride ended at the north fork of the Teton River where we had to wade about a hundred yards and then put up a makeshift bridge to cross the main stream. The closer we got to Sugar City the more it seemed that we were in a different world, in the wake of a plague or a great devastating war. Only two of three survivors could be seen wandering aimlessly about. All else was stillness and desolation. We spoke little, listening only to the sound of our footfalls on the dead air. All familiar
landmarks were gone or changed so drastically that my sense of disorientation became extremely acute. Since I was a child I had not been so glad to have Dad there with me.

When we found our street I became painfully aware that only one house remained on our side of the clock and it was not mine. All else had been swept clean. Even the trees that remained were lying flat on the ground as if combed there by a giant rake. We found our home across the street at the end of the block. Not much was left but the roof, a few bricks, and the inside walls. The south and west outside walls were completely gone along with all the furniture and appliances. Part of the north wall was also gone. Two bedrooms alone remained intact. The doors had jammed shut so not much had escaped, but everything was topsy-turvy and mixed with a foot of mud. One item alone in the entire ruin remained upright. Caught between chests-of-drawers and metal closets the girls’ bunk bed stood erect. The top mattress was dry, having floated up and come to rest again without even ruffling the covers. There amidst the abomination of desolation, staring curiously at me from his perch was my little blue friend with the monotonous vocabulary.

At that moment I realized the truth of what I had taught—not a sparrow shall fall…I could not hold back the tears. I knew for certain that the Lord had protected us and our neighbors, preserving our lives by his matchless power. The next verse reads “Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.”

There was not much to salvage and all of our most precious keepsakes were gone, but my heart was lighter as we walked back toward the pickup three miles to the north. I held the cage myself all the way. Willy didn’t stop chattering until we reached our destination.