

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Ann Davenport – Life during the
Teton Flood

By Ann Davenport

1977

Box 6 Folder 3

Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

Christina Sorensen: Ann, would you spell your name please?

Ann Davenport: Ann Davenport.

CS: How old are you?

AD: I'm forty-two.

CS: Where were you born?

AD: In Bloomington, Idaho.

CS: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

AD: We have been here eighteen years.

CS: Prior to the flood, did you own your own home?

AD: Yes, we did.

CS: What was your address at the time of the flood?

AD: All but the oldest boy who is away from home.

CS: Do you work for a living?

AD: No, I'm a homemaker.

CS: Prior to the construction of the dam, were you in favor of it or opposed to it?

AD: I was in favor of it because of the flooding problems and it was needed for irrigation. I think it's necessary.

CS: Looking back to that morning when the dam broke, do you recall what you were doing, where you were, and what was your initial reaction when the dam broke?

AD: I was home doing the regular Saturday morning chores. One of my neighbors called and said, "Ann, the dam has broken. Is that going to affect us?" I laughed at her and said, "If you don't believe me turn on your radio and listen." I decided she was serious and I said, "Even if it does, we are so far away, it's not going to make much difference. Don't worry about it." Her husband wasn't home and she was upset so I told her not to worry, it wouldn't be that serious.

When I hung up I thought maybe I ought to go next door and ask what they thought about it. They also felt it was nothing to worry about. When I went home, my husband, who had been shopping, came home and was immediately concerned. He said,

“You get the kids in the car. We are leaving.” Then I began to get a little concerned. When he was upset, I began to think that it wasn’t as funny as I thought it was.

CS: Did you make any preparation in your home before leaving?

AD: Very little. The two oldest girls were at work and so I called them and told them we were coming to get them. We took our children and a couple of the neighbor children whose parents happened to be out of town over the weekend up to the hill. Then my husband and I went back and got one suitcase full of clothing and a little bit of food. Then we went to an apartment complex where a lot of widows lived and saw that they had a way out. He took three of them and a bird to the hill and then went back home and turned the power off.

CS: Could you see the waters coming into the town?

AD: Yes, we could see it for a long time before we realized what it was. It just looked like sand, except we could tell it was moving. It didn’t look like you’d expect water to look like. It still didn’t really seem serious until we got to the highway. That was almost directly north of where we were standing. Then we could see a big home, a brick home, moving across the road. All of us realized that it was much more serious than we thought. After that, we could see all kinds of things moving.

When the water got fairly close to our home, it hit a gasoline storage area and exploded. When that blew up there was a lot of black smoke and one of my daughters became hysterical because it was so close to our home. She was afraid our home was going to burn. It was frightening when we could see what it was doing as it moved along.

CS: Could you actually see it when it did come to your home?

AD: Yes.

CS: How did you feel when you saw that?

AD: There are a lot of trees and buildings around our home and we could see that it was in the neighborhood of our home but not our house. My husband borrowed some binoculars from a man who was standing there and he could see one corner of our home. He kept saying our home was still standing, which was reassuring. Even at that point we still didn’t realize what it was going to look like when we went back.

CS: When were you actually able to go back to your home and what did you find when you got there?

AD: About five or six at night, we could see that we were not going to be able to get home that night. I think most of us thought the water would go on through and we would pack up our things and go back home. We could see that it wasn’t going to be possible, so I took the children and went to my sister’s in Idaho Falls. My husband, who has a ham

radio license, stayed and helped operate the ham radio station to get the emergency messages back and forth. I went to my sister's home and made telephone calls to my family and to the parents of the kids that we had with us to tell them we were safe.

My husband tried to go to the house late Saturday night and couldn't get there; there was still too much water and too much debris. He went back again on Sunday and waded in, looked, and left again. He sent word to me that I was not to come home. I was upset because I had been so worried and I wanted to come home, so I sent a message back that I was coming home. Monday morning my sister and her husband, his sister and her husband, and three of our daughters came with me and we immediately started cleaning.

I guess you are in a state of shock when something like that happens. My sister immediately burst into tears when she saw my home, but I never did really cry about it. I think I was in a state of shock and just thought, "I have to get busy and save what I can." It made us sick because we spent the fifteen years we lived in the house remodeling and fixing. We had just finished the main part of the remodeling in October. We had our house pretty much the way we wanted it to be. It discouraged us.

CS: Did you have mostly your family helping you or did you have any outside volunteers who helped in the cleanup?

AD: It was mostly our families. I come from a large family; there are nine children and they came from as far away as Washington and helped.

We had twenty different people from our family who were there and that made a tremendous difference that first week. This helped to keep us from getting discouraged. When you knew that other people cared about you and they would drop whatever they were doing and would come and help, it was a terrific boost to our morale. We did have some volunteers a little later on when we started the rebuilding process. We had six people from Paul, Idaho, one day and another day we had two boys that came and helped.

CS: What did you think of the volunteers coming in?

AD: I think it made all the difference, because seeing people come lifted you up and made you feel like you could go on and everything was going to be all right. You could see that it was getting better and that there was an end to it. It did so much for our morale.

CS: In your home, how high did the water go up?

AD: We had three floors, basement, main floor, and upstairs. It was five feet outside, but inside the house, it filled the basement and went about thirty inches on the main floor.

CS: Did you have to tear the home down and rebuild it?

AD: No, we redid it. It looked like we didn't have very much structural damage and it wasn't going to be too bad to fix it. So we took everything out and cleaned and threw away a lot of things. We are going to do what they call the minimum repair through the government. They did this but it wasn't sufficient. As soon as that was done, we could see additional problems. The smell was terrible and the walls cracked. They were plaster and they cracked up to the ceiling. Every day they just kept getting worse. We felt like we couldn't patch it together a little bit and be happy with it, so we ended up tearing out the complete main floor, walls, cupboards, everything down to the studs and redid the whole thing.

CS: Was there any one thing that you lost that you felt was particularly irreplaceable that you felt the worst about?

AD: I felt bad about all the things that belonged to my husband's mother and my mother. Neither one is living and the things or theirs that we had that were damaged we felt very badly about. Our genealogy records and our photographs turned out to be not quite serious as it seemed at that time because I have found negatives of a lot of pictures that I had that were up on closet shelves and didn't get wet. There were a lot of things like school pictures of the children and baby pictures that I had someone else take that I can't replace. My son is serving a mission and all of his things that were at home were stored in the basement. His yearbooks and keepsakes and things were all ruined. We felt bad about that. My husband felt especially bad when we had to throw away his radio equipment. That was hard for him.

CS: In those next few weeks after the flood, did you have any involvement with organizations such as the Red Cross and the LDS Church and other groups that were helping? What did you think of the kinds of services that they provided?

AD: Generally, I thought they did a tremendous job. The Red Cross came and would do anything they possibly could to help you. The LDS Church did a tremendous job with volunteers, food, clothing, and all these things. I don't think anyone went hungry or without a place to stay. At last it was available to them if they would take it. We weren't so cold or hungry or without any of the things that we really needed. It was tremendous.

The government really tried to help. They had a lot of red tape and there were a few things that I was a little unhappy about. We took this minimum repair, which the government paid for. It wasn't the government itself that was at fault, but some of the people who worked for them, wasn't the government, it was the people who they hired. These people made a tremendous amount of money doing this type of thing and did not do good work.

Because we had taken this program and then found out that our home was in worse shape than we thought it was, we didn't have any place to live. We were not eligible for a trailer or any other type of housing. So we looked and were fortunate enough to find an apartment which we could live in until college started. We stayed there until the 15th of August; then we had to move. We had to move into our home which

didn't have any walls whatsoever in it. We moved back into our home which didn't have any walls whatsoever in it. We moved back into the basement and actually camped in the basement for five months before our home finished. I was unhappy about that because there were trailers available. Because of regulations, you could either have a trailer or the minimum repair but not both. I was without a kitchen. I hooked the water hoses into my washing machine and did the dishes that way. We took a stove downstairs and my husband wired it so we could plug it into the dryer outlet. The children had bedrooms in the upstairs that weren't damaged so we did use those. But for my cooking facilities and (our own) sleeping facilities we had to camp in that unfinished basement. That was depressing. Of course, they were working on the main floor and every time they would bang on the floor or sand the floors or any of this, we would have dirt all over everything. That was one of the hardest times for me. Some people would come in and couldn't believe that people would live under circumstances like that. They didn't realize that was our only choice.

CS: When did you file your claim and received your money from the government, were you and your husband satisfied with the treatment?

AD: Very much. We felt they were very fair about it. We tried to be honest in the things that we claimed and in the prices that we charged and they gave us almost exactly what we asked for. They didn't pay for our extra housing and the other item, but other than that, they paid for everything else. The man who came to verify was very kind and very understanding and he said, "I can tell that you have done a lot of work on your home. Under the circumstances, I think that I would have had it torn it down and started over." I said, "It's too late to do that now."

Most of our neighbors had gone. We're in a neighborhood that borders on the commercial district. Most of our neighbors whose homes were destroyed didn't want to build new homes in that area. They wanted to move to a more residential area. If we would have had to rebuild, I would not have rebuilt here. It left us in a bad situation because the businesses wanted to move into that area, which would have meant we would have had a business right next door which we didn't want. We had to fight it and we had to go to the city council and had to do a number of things to keep this from happening. So this was a problem. This was another reason he said he would probably have had the house torn down and rebuilt somewhere else. But these decisions had to be made with what information we had and without knowing really what was going to happen or how much the government was going to help we did the best we could under the circumstances.

CS: There has been some talk about some people having filed fraudulent claims with the government on their returns. Do you know anybody who did this?

AD: I know of one person who did it. But I think 99% of the time, the people were honest.

CS: A lot of contractors and subcontractors have come into the area from the outside and taken advantage of the situation and done shabby work or left town without finishing their work. Are you aware of any instances of this happening?

AD: Yes, many times it's happened. I think the quality of the work that is being done is not good. I'm concerned because I feel like in my own home, in my friends' homes, in some of the new homes that I have been in, the quality is not good. We are just not getting the quality that we did before. I don't think that it's as much that people don't want to, as it is there is so much to be done and they hurry to finish and go on. Our kitchen cabinets for instance, are not good cabinets. We had the same company build them who had built them new for us about three years ago. We had been very happy with them. The quality is poor compared to the ones we had. I think it's because they were so rushed that they didn't take time to do quality work. They didn't have them sanded smooth, they don't fit as well and there are a number of things that we are not happy about. This is why we have done a lot of work ourselves, because we felt like we knew how it was done even if it took a long time to get it taken care of.

CS: What sort of positive things do you think are coming out of this whole flood experience and what negative things?

AD: I think one thing that I feel bad about is all the old landmarks are gone. I lived close to Washington School. It needed to be torn down for years but it still makes me feel bad that it's gone. That old Eight Ward is gone. Most of the older homes in town are gone. As I drive down the streets it doesn't seem like home. You have this feeling of disorientation. It has changed the entire face of the town. Some of the old buildings needed to be replaced and it is good, but it does change the tone of the town. My neighborhood finally has new homes on the block and it really looks better than it did before the flood. But we don't reel as much at home as we did before.

CS: Have you noticed any change in the spirit of the community and people-to-people relationships?

AD: There is little jealousy. Some people resent the fact that we are getting new homes and new things. I have had this feeling from some people that are a little resentful about the new things that I have. I think there is a little more of this type of feeling than there was even among the people who were in the flood. That concerns me. This is why I'm glad that they are not publishing the amount of money that people got. I think that it would only lead to discontent and bitterness. I don't want to know what anybody else got. Maybe I would have the same problem. I would think they didn't lose any more than I did and they got more money. I think it's good that people don't know. A lot of people are doing too much guessing about how much people got and how much government paid for their things. My former neighbor has a new home and a lot of people think they have a new home free and clear. The government didn't pay for the new home, they paid only for their old home and they are having to pay the rest of it on a 30 year mortgage. A lot of people fail to realize this.

CS: You have children and I was wondering if you've noticed if the flood has had any sort of effect on them or made any kind of changes in their personalities, attitudes, or behavior over this last year?

AD: The littlest one was eight at the time of the flood, and I believe that it was harder on her than any of us because she didn't sleep well for a number of months after the flood. She never said too much about it but she just kind of clung to us a little bit and seemed insecure. I didn't have much time to spend with her. I left her at my sister's in Idaho Falls while we came up here to work, because there really wasn't anything that she could do. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe I should have brought her a little more and let her feel like she was helping, but we worked such long hours and so forth that it seemed too long for her to come and stay. So we would leave her and this was hard for her.

The other kids at home are all girls, but they really pitched in and helped. I think it was good for them to realize that material things, worldly things, can pass away so quickly and that the important thing was that we were together as a family and that we still had the things that really mattered. I think they realized this and I think that part of it has been a good experience for them.

CS: Do you think the impact of the flood was especially hard on any particular age group?

AD: I think it was hard on the youth, the really young children, and also on the elderly. The rest of us could cope and adjust and had more resources to work with than the elderly people. I have a neighbor who is 86, and it's been very hard on her. I have felt extremely sorry for her. Her home had to be torn down. She finally got a new one last month. She has had to live in a trailer and it's been hard for her to get around. It was hard for her to get in and out of her trailer. It was very depressing for her to see all the things that she had over these years, all of her memories wiped out. Also to make all the decisions and do all these things when you are 86 years old is terrible, that's the only word I can think of. I felt very sorry for her that she had to go through all this alone.

CS: In observing people's responses and reactions to the flood and to the recovery process, have you thought that there has been any difference in reaction to it between those people who are LDS and those who are not LDS, or between those who are active in the church or those who are less active?

AD: I don't have that many people to compare with, but I do think the church was a strength to us, not only for the help that they gave us but also for the fact that we have taught to be self-sufficient and we've been taught to take care of ourselves and do what we can to help ourselves. I think in a lot of places when things like this happen the people sit back and wait for someone else to do it. The verifier said, "I can't believe all the things that you people have done on your own to fix it and make the best of it." We have been taught to get in and make the best of it and work and help each other and this was a strength. I really don't know of anyone outside the church who didn't react well, or who had bitterness. The volunteers that came seemed to help everyone regardless of their religion. The people from the Teton Interfaith and the LDS church didn't ask what

church you belonged to or what you believed before they helped. I don't know whether it made much a difference or not.

CS: Did you or any member of your family have any spiritual experiences that you would care to talk about?

AD: I can't think of any.

CS: There has been a lot of talk about the cause of the dam failure, and most people believed that it was a man-made disaster. Some people have expressed the idea that it was an act of divine retribution and that God was in some way punishing the people. How do you feel about that kind of idea?

AD: I feel very much against the idea that it was divine retribution. That just goes against my thinking entirely. I think it was a mistake of man somewhere along the line and the dam didn't hold. I just don't believe that God had anything to do with the dam breaking.

CS: Now that they are talking about rebuilding it, are you in favor or opposed to it, and if they built it again would you want it in the same location?

AD: That's a hard question. It needed and it still is needed. I'm afraid that I would be very uneasy having it there, but I can't really say that I would be against it. I can see that it's needed but I can also see that it would make me very uneasy if it were there. So I have mixed feelings about it.

CS: AS you have looked over this last year and experiences that you have gone through what, if any, changes can you see in your own personal attitudes, values, beliefs, or personality that you would attribute directly to the flood experience?

AD: Right after the flood, I kept telling myself that I wasn't going to get as involved in things as I had been. I wasn't going to be so busy that I couldn't enjoy my family and that I didn't have time to visit my neighbors. I was going to live a little more simple life and I wasn't going to worry if my floor didn't get swept and if my house wasn't exactly the way that I thought it ought to be. But you know, I find myself slipping back into the same things that I was doing. I'm not only as busy as I was, I'm busier. I have all the things that I had before the flood, plus all the flood damage to clean up. We still have our complete basement that needs to be fixed. We don't have a fence around our yard, we don't have a clothesline. I've spent nearly all summer trying to get the yard in shape. So I find myself even busier than I was before. This is one thing that I can see I need to change. I would be happier if I could do it, but I haven't found the formula by which I can accomplish it.

I think it did make all of us weigh our values a little more and decide what things are important to us. It made us appreciate our families tremendously. Sometimes, your brothers and sisters got scattered and you think that they are living their own lives, they

are not really caring about you. Then when the chips are down, you find out that they really do care about you and they would do anything they could to help you.

It's been really hard not to get depressed. There have been a number of times when I've been very discouraged. I think this comes from being tired. You get tired and it's easy to get depressed and discouraged. Then I've also felt bad when some of my friends were jealous of the new things that I have. You feel a little bit guilty for having them. I don't like these feelings.

I feel ten years older. I feel that it's been hard on all of us. There have been innumerable frustrations. You wait for this to be done and you wait for that to be done and when you get it done, it isn't right. The frustrations are just something you can't explain to anybody until you have lived through it. I don't think anyone came to our home and did something when they told us they would do it with the exception of one man. He happens to be our neighbor. His wife died the night of the flood. He is not a member of the church and we have tried to befriend him and he has been really kind to us. He helped us with some of our carpentry work when he got his home done. If he said he'd be there at 8:00 in the morning, he was there at 8:00 in the morning. He was the only craftsman who came when he said he would. You would wait and wait and they wouldn't come and part of the time when it was finished it wouldn't be quality work. It's been very frustrating and it's been hard not to be disillusioned and unhappy with some of the results.

CS: It seems to a lot of people when they come into town now and never have been here before that it looks as if nothing has ever happened here. You can barely tell that there was a flood, but I'm sure that's not really true. Have you found that with yourself and your friends and neighbors that this is something that the effects of are lingering and do you feel that they will continue to linger for a while?

AD: I think there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done. A lot of people are still not in their homes and a lot of people who are in their homes still have a lot of work that needs to be done, a lot of yard work, maybe even little things inside their home. It's going to take a long time before everything is repaired that was damaged, everything is replaced, and everything is back the way you would like it to be. It's hard for me because it goes on and on and doesn't seem to be ending. It's hard on my husband because he has to spend all the free time he was working on our home and trying to fix things up for us. It's hard on the children because they are tired of the whole thing and want to get on with their lives. I think one of the hardest things is that it goes on and on and on for so long.

CS: Have you felt that maybe some of these other people in the community who weren't affected by the flood, have been a little impatient with this?

AD: Yes, they have been. They think we ought to get back to normal and they are a little tired of hearing about it. They are tired of being inconvenienced. They were impatient at the time of the flood because there weren't places to shop and this wasn't available and that wasn't available and it was messy downtown and it was messy in the stores. I guess

it's hard to understand unless you have lived with the problem. They don't really know all the frustrations and all the problems because they haven't had to live in it.

CS: Have you ever thought or wondered if you would ever forget it or if it ever would be over? Do you feel like something is always going to be with you?

AD: I think it will always be with us. I think something that was this far reaching and has taken so long, can't help but be a vital part of your life. I don't think that anyone who was involved in it anyway would ever forget it. I was reading the book, That Day in June. You forgot about the flood and put it in the back of your mind and some day it almost seems like it didn't happen, and yet when you read some of those things, it all rushes back to you and it's almost too painful to think about. If you talked to someone about it, it brings all these feelings rushing back to you. I think it will always be that to us. I think it will always be there within us. Some of these things that it has done will maybe be for good for us. I think about when we were eating our meals at the college and you would see people of all types and people who had money and people who didn't have money. We all looked the same. You couldn't tell who had money and who didn't because we were all dirty and muddy and we all sat down together and ate our meals. We were all in the same boat and all had the same problems. This was a strength to all of us. It was a uniting thing and I think this was good for us. We would think, "I'm not the only one in this mess. I can go back and work again." This was one good thing that came out of it, the good feelings among the people involved and the kindness of the people who came and fixed those meals for us. Along with the feelings of sadness, those good feelings will stay with us too, I think.

CS: Thank you, Mrs. Davenport.