

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Clarie Browning– Life during the
Teton Flood

By Clarie Browning

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Box 5 Folder 27

Oral Interview conducted by Ann Hayes

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

AH: Clarie, would you please spell your name?

CB: Clarie Browning.

AH: Where in Rexburg do your parents live?

CB: On 2nd North and 3rd East. Behind it is a large gravel pit which had something to do with the way the water went when the flood came. It caused it to split into two portions and then flowed back together and hit again.

AH: You mean it came down, hit once, and turned around and went back?

CB: As the water came toward their property, it spilt into two parts and one part went into the gravel. It caused a suction and pulled the water back together and hit the property again. The first time it hit, it brought a lot of debris and the second time it took away the small buildings.

AH: Were your parents in their home at the time of the flood?

CB: No, they had left about twelve minutes before the water hit. My brother, who works with my father in the honey business, was traveling up one of the other valleys. The night before he had installed a CB radio in his truck. He was listening to the radio when they announced that the dam had burst. He turned the truck and headed for Rexburg. They found that my parents were working in the garden and they had quite a difficult time convincing them to leave. My mother and father had been in Rexburg since 196 and 1964 when there was flooding. There was about five feet of water on their property then. My father said, "We'll go up on the second floor in the warehouse and wait it out." My brother said, "No, I think we'd better leave the property." They took a few things with them, my father's briefcase, a handful of checks, my mother's purse, a tape recorder and binoculars. They went up on the bench. My brother, three of my nephews and my parents sat up on the bench and watched the water come and hit the property and take everything that they could see. They described it as looking like a big rolling dust storm coming toward Rexburg. They had their field glasses and watched their property and the actual destruction of their home.

AH: Where were you at the time of the flood?

CB: I was in Canada with a friend, my sister, her husband, and their family. We were in the Hudson Bay Company shopping and the broadcast came over the radio. I hadn't heard a radio in a department store before, but they turned it up quite loud. We were quite amused and they were talking about the Teton Dam. We didn't recognize it until they said Rexburg, Idaho. We stopped short and started listening.

We tried to call to see if we could find anything out. We couldn't get through. We got through to Seattle and that was as far as we could go. We called Utah by calling my brother and having him return our call. We were able to find out my parents were safe.

AH: What was the reaction of the people of Canada?

CB: They were very concerned. A lot of people were familiar with Idaho and the area. I guess they travel quite often. They were concerned and everywhere we went we heard broadcasts of what happened. We got a lot of erroneous reports about five hundred people drowning and things like that. There were a number of people living in Vancouver who had families in Rexburg. One was Dr. Biddulph's son. They were unable to get any word of their family. When we attended church the next day we met them. Everywhere we went our license was a give-a-way. People would stop us and ask us if we had any family in that area and if we had learned anything about the flood. We told them we hadn't, but when we finally got through to talk to my parents, Dad mentioned that he was with Doctor Biddulph on the bench. We could tell this man that we knew his father was alive. He was quite elated about that.

AH: Did you come back immediately to Rexburg?

CB: No. When we talked to my parents, my father told us not to come right back. We were puzzled at first. He said, "Wait a few days until we know what is happening and call back. When you come, your brothers will be tired and you'll be fresh and ready to help." We waited for about four days before we headed for home.

AH: What condition were things in when you arrived in Rexburg?

CB: A lot of confusion and so much destruction it was shocking to see. As I'd spent most of my life growing up there, I felt sick.

AH: How were your parents when you got home?

CB: They were in a state of shock, particularly my father who seemed to be unable to communicate with anyone. In fact, he wouldn't come out if there were more than one or two people because he wanted to stay by himself. He'd grown up in this home since he was nine years old. He had worked with his father in the bee business and centered it at that home. It had a lot of meaning to him. My mother is from that area, so it affected her deeply also. They were having a difficult time dealing with what had happened.

AH: What condition was their home in?

CB: Their house was off its foundation. There had been fifteen feet of water on their property. One of the HUD men told us it was as high as anywhere in Rexburg.

In the warehouse, a two-story building, it had gone five feet into the second floor. The water stayed on the property over a week and there was a great deal of debris. There were three out-buildings beside the warehouse. They disappeared. The warehouse remained. We never found at all of the other buildings in the valley. They contained materials for the business, bottles, cans, lids, labels, and heavy machinery.

AH: Can you tell us a little bit about the business so we'll understand it better?

CB: It is a large honey business. There are only a few in the valley, so when they did make their claim to HUD they had difficulties because the HUD people couldn't understand what was there, nor did they have any idea of the value of the property. They had a large home and a two story warehouse with a loading ramp. They had moved all the vehicles off the property except the fifth wheel flat-bed trailer and one truck which was on the loading ramp off the second floor. It had 500 cases of bottles that had been delivered Friday morning and we found a few of those down on the west end of Main Street in one of the offices there. That's all we ever found of those. We had a lot of 700 pound drums that were empty and they were stacked on this fifth wheel trailer. Those disappeared.

AH: did you have any great deal of honey available in the warehouse at the time?

CB: Yes, there was a lot of honey. In fact, the bottom floor was almost entirely filled with 60 containers of honey. The upper floor contained many of the 700 pound barrels of honey. Maybe that's what kept the warehouse standing was all the weight. The only damage to that structure was in the one corner where it was empty.

AH: Did you lose the honey?

CB: Yes. Even though it was in sealed containers, the pressure was so great it forced the lids up and there was water and mud inside the cans. In the boiler room there was mud inside the cans. In the boiler room there was mud seven feet up the pipes that the force of water had pushed clear to the second floor.

AH: Was the machinery ruined?

CB: Yes, all the machinery was ruined. The silt that was with the water went into the bearings of everything. Even though we were able to start some of them after reconditioning, there isn't a one of them that is running now, a year later.

AH: Then your father had to replace all the machinery?

CB: Yes, everything that had a motor.

AH: Was all this equipment replaceable?

CB: No, some of it was as old as 60 years old and could not be replaced. Some of it my father and grandfather had invented. They have their own cream honey that is a particular process that they invented. The machinery wasn't available. They had to rebuild it and have welders and people come in and make the machinery. One huge machine that we paid over \$500 for over 30 years ago, we found it cost \$6,000 and the

design had not changed one bit. It was interesting that the machine, which was one of our major pieces of machinery hadn't changed at all.

AH: What did your parents have to do to get all the material ready to turn in to the government?

CB: It's been more than a year's work. Some of the machinery cannot be replaced. So what they would do is get catalogs with things as nearly alike as possible or even just a Sears catalog and take the value from that. Sometimes it was a great deal lower, but sometimes there wasn't a way to find the value. Then they would get some of that material ready and turn it in and people would say, "You're on the right track, keep going." So when we thought we were finished we would put in another two or three months. Our whole family has been involved in getting our claim ready to turn in to the government.

AH: Who did you have to turn the material in to?

CB: The HUD people, but each part of the property had to go to different people. One thing, when we started processing is that you had to think about things you normally wouldn't, like the fence that had existed on the property for 25 years. We had to go and fine out how long it was an dhow much wire it would take to replace this part and that part and how much each post cost.

AH: Did they require that you have pictures of things or proof that you did have this equipment?

CB: We had pictures. All of our friends' families went through pictures. My sister had even done some paintings of the area because it was kind of picturesque. We had a rather unusual looking boiler that had lots of pipes and it was quite quaint. She had done a painting of it and they submitted a picture of it as the boiler, since we didn't have any kind of a picture of what the boiler was. They accepted the painting. It was the kind of place everyone wanted to visit and we had a lot of picture. We had taken pictures of the garden, one corner would show a stack of maybe 100 barrels of honey stacked and ready to be put inside the warehouse. They accepted all of those photographs. People would go through and assess what they could use for proof. They took a lot of pictures too. They came in and took pictures inside and out.

AH: HUD did this?

CB: Yes.

AH: Did their appraisers come in and appraise the amount of damage?

CB: Yes, different appraisers came for different parts, some came for the home and some came for the business.

AH: Do you know how much they appraised the loss for?

CB: No, I don't.

AH: Your house was completely ruined?

CB: Yes, it's been demolished now. The only thing left on the property is the warehouse.

AH: Did your parents build a new warehouse and new business?

CB: Yes, they had to build a new warehouse and a new home.

AH: It's not in the same location?

CB: No, they were unable to build it in the same location. The new requirements for the standards for building have changed and instead of building up so high they would square the building out and they needed more property. So they bought a new piece of land.

AH: Were they required to borrow money to do this?

CB: I think the government financed it. The money they received, they received in bits and pieces. They didn't receive it as a whole. It was kind of difficult to get their building started since they didn't have the total amount of money they needed to finance it.

AH: Did they lose their bees?

CB: Yes, because bees are placed on farms or pieces of property throughout the valley. Often there is property available along rivers and canals and so we lost quite a considerable amount of bees. We didn't lose as many bees as some of the other bee keepers in the area. Probably our greatest loss was in our warehouse and the storage honey we had there. My father always had the philosophy to keep one crop ahead. Since honey isn't a perishable item you can do that, so he probably had two crops of honey in his warehouse.

AH: And he lost all that honey?

CB: Yes, so that will be the greatest loss.

AH: Is he in business now with his new equipment?

CB: Yes, they have been on a limited basis. They figure they didn't even have an income for over 2200 days after the flood.

AH: When your parents had to leave their house and weren't able to get back to it, where did they stay?

CB: Since they had another home here in Idaho Falls, they came to that. They weren't allowed to go back to the property at all; I think it was June 7 before we could get back to the house. It was five days before they could get to the warehouse. It's probably 100 yards out to the warehouse but there's a drop in the level of the land there and there was about five feet of water that stayed in the warehouse for about five days. When we returned from Canada there was still about three feet of water in the warehouse.

AH: Where did they stay that Saturday night?

CB: They came with my brother to Idaho Falls. This is where we were able to contact them.

AH: How long did they have to stay in their Idaho Falls home?

CB: Until there was a trailer brought in by some people that we didn't know at all. It was a small travel trailer, two beds. They brought it in, stocked with linens and canned goods, completely ready to go. My parents were able to stay in that. We worked out a little situation where my parents would stay one night and we would stay the next. We couldn't leave the property because the business was there and there was so much looting.

AH: Did they have any vandalism on their land?

CB: Yes, we did have some. Some people broke into our warehouse. Our big fifth wheel trailer was washed over into the gravel pit a block from where it had been sitting and it was flipped up-side-down. As the water went down, we kept watching a particular group of people go out to that and they did eventually steal it. We recovered it though.

AH: Were the people caught? Did you report it to the police?

CB: Yes. It was taken care of in about two days. We had been watching them as they kept watching the water go down. I don't know how they laid claim to the big equipment but they took very large equipment and loaded it into a dump truck and made off with the trailer.

AH: Were these local people or were they from another area?

CB: I don't know whether they were or not. There were probably five men involved in the moving of it. We had some things taken from the house, too. There were supplies and some antique glassware and light fixtures that were taken. My father was very comfortable about leaving the property and anyone that came near, he asked to leave. He told us to shoot anybody that came on to the property. We were afraid we were going to have to ask someone to leave but we never did.

AH: Did a church group come to help them clean up?

CB: Yes, two church groups came. First my father seemed so overwhelmed by the flood he would not let anyone come onto the property, only the government people that came to access the problems there.

When I returned from Canada, my father turned some of the business for me to handle. Then we would go up and we would stay with them. The stake building is just about a half block from the property and they were serving meals and having their meetings there and the organization of the cleanup. But my father didn't seem able to go down and join in that. He was nervous and very mixed up. So he would send me down with my friend and we would eat our meals here and stay for the organizational meetings after dinner. Then we would go back and report what was available. First he wouldn't allow anyone to come in and clean up. The first five days the family were the only ones allowed on the property.

Finally, he consented to let the cleanup crews come in. One of the biggest groups that came in was from Logan. Three of the Logan bishops and one of the councilmen, and the mayor and about ten women and a lot of young men came in. They were really good workers and really kind people. They were so kind to my parents who were still experiencing shock. The one bishop seemed to make a difference to my father. He came to me and said, "Where is your father?" I said he was behind the warehouse, and wouldn't come out in groups of people. He said, "Well, I'll go back and talk to him." It had been about eight days since the flood and my father still couldn't come out where groups of people were. This man went back and spent nearly two hours before I ever saw him again. When he came back, he brought my father with him. It was the first time he came in to a group of people and he had my father take him around and show him all the property and everything that had been lost. This was a turning point for my father because after then he seemed to feel a lot better. But this man spent all of his time and I think he really knew where he was needed the most because he spent all that time talking with my father. My mother couldn't stop talking. His next chore when he got her to take him around and show her everything. She was calm again. I really felt grateful to him for the time he spent with them. That was a turning point for them both, emotionally.

AH: Was the group from Logan the only one that came?

CB: No, there was another ward that came from my parents ward in Idaho Falls. Nearly the whole ward turned out to wash bottles. The interior of our warehouse also had a lot of bottles. In the interior we had thousands of cases. We had just received a new shipment of bottles and lids just a week or two before. What happened was all the boxes dissolved around the bottles and they were left sitting in about three inches of mud. Some of them were entirely filled with mud. Not very many of them were broken. At first we thought that we could use these bottles again and later we found that we could use only a few of them. Any plastic packing materials or plastic bottles had to be destroyed. Of course, they couldn't be sterilized. At first we improvised with two big vats that looked like bath tubs and hoses and we'd wash the mud out of those bottles.

This ward from Idaho Falls came and put them in boxes which they took in pick up loads. Then they distributed them throughout the ward to the ladies who washed them. It took on the average about five washings seven dozen at a time in the dishwasher. These ladies were washing bottles for weeks and weeks.

AH: Clarie, you said you attended the meetings at the stake house, can you tell us a little about them?

CB: It was really interesting. I really admire people that were helping organize. Every night they had their dinner. Everyone that was part of that stake was dependant on eating there at the stake house because they were living in the dorms at the college and had no place to cook. So they would come there to the stake house and eat their evening meal. They would break up into wards after dinner and hold their ward meetings. They would break up into wards after dinner and hold their ward meetings. They would ask what needed to be done the next day, what were the most pressing thing, whose basement hadn't been pumped, if the live garbage had all been cleared away, and if the debris was being taken care of? They had a pattern for doing the most important things and there was a list for each one and you signed up what you needed done and how many workers you could use. That was how you got them, they were sent out from the stake houses the next day. It's just amazing how all the people came. They all brought their own lunches, tools, rakes, shovels, hammers, and things. They came prepared to be independent from what was there in Rexburg. They wouldn't add to the burden.

As you were working, if you needed something, you went to the stake house and they either gave you the equipment you needed or you signed up to use the equipment available. It was just a short time until it was your turn. Pumping basements seemed to be the most difficult thing to do and they had the longest waiting list. A great many people came from Idaho Falls with big pumps to pump out basements. They were really appreciated. When that was done people could kind of go on their own and work. You were at a standstill if your house was still full of water.

AH: Who was in charge of organizing all of this?

CB: The stake presidents and their counselors. Each man had his counselors and he would assign group leaders and then there was a block representative from every block in the city. He was responsible to that ward to report to the bishop what needed to be done. There were some houses where people were on vacation and they couldn't go into the house without permission, but they would do things that had to be done around the property. If there was live garbage that had to be removed, it was removed. Until they had permission, they didn't even work at a house unless some fairly member was there.

AH: did the church set some type of police assistance up to watch these homes that people were not living in at the time?

CB: Yes, the block representatives. A person living on the block would go around every evening to all of the houses and ask, "Are there any problems? Have you seen anything

today that should be reported?" They would come every single evening to find out and they would report to the ward that there was no one there. The house right next door to my parents home was empty so they would report on this house.

AH: How did they choose a block representative?

CB: I don't know how they did. It seemed to be anyone who was willing to do the leg work and go around. A young man with a real large family on our block was ever every evening to see what was needed. You wonder how he had the time to give anybody else help.

AH: Then all the help that your parents got was from church organizations?

CB: Yes. Not all the Mormon Church though. The Mennonite people came from Aberdeen and worked clearing debris and helping the people next door when they returned from vacation. They spent about two weeks working in that home. They would come in a bus from Aberdeen and they each wore little stickers that said they were Mennonite workers and they came to help. Everyone really appreciated them and how thorough they were. They evidently had an organization in their church where they would go to troubled spots and work. They had gone a lot of different places before.

AH: Did your parents get any assistance from government agencies?

CB: Yes, they had to have a couple of helicopters come in and move telephone poles and big things, many pieces of equipment that had been washed in and so the government agencies were involved bringing out really large equipment.

AH: Did your parents have property that cannot be replaced such as pictures and legal documents?

CB: Yes, in fact, they were just having their wills made and all of the deeds to the property were in the house at the time. Most of them were destroyed. We had quite a time finding the copies of them. Fortunately, we have been able to make all the claims to it and had the documents replaced. They lost a lot of things. They had a very large library they lost and it was sad to see a lot of those things go. They had many antiques that were very well cared for. All of them were destroyed. There were very few things from the house that could be saved.

AH: Did they get compensation for these things?

CB: Some, but antiques are kind of nebulous and it's pretty hard to put a value on things. They did lose some of their property even. It collapsed into the gravel pit. As they are filling the gravel pit up now with all that debris, I guess we will reclaim that property.

AH: How are your parents adjusting now?

CB: They seem to be adjusting well. They have accepted the situation. I don't see that there is bitterness, a sadness perhaps of the loss of the things that cannot be replaced and of not being able to go back to their property and have their business and home there again. I've seen them age a great deal in this last year, perhaps more than ever before.

AH: Thank you, Ms. Browning.