

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Gaylen W. Bagley – Life during the
Teton Flood

By Gaylen W. Bagley

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Box 5 Folder 9

Oral Interview conducted by Richard Stallings

Transcribed by Alina Mower April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

RS: Would you please spell your full name?

GB: Gaylen Wendell Bagley.

RS: Where were you born?

GB: Driggs, Idaho.

RS: How long have you lived here in the Madison County area?

GB: Four years.

RS: How old are you?

GB: Twenty-four.

RS: Do you have a family?

GB: I have a wife and three kids.

RS: How many were living in your home at the time of the flood?

GB: There were four.

RS: What was your address then?

GB: Box 262, Sugar City.

RS: What is your present address?

GB: Route 3, Rexburg.

RS: How long have you lived here in the present address?

GB: About one year and four months.

RS: So you've moved here since the flood?

GB: Yes.

RS: What do you do for a living?

GB: I work for a construction company.

RS: Did you own your home prior to the flood?

GB: We owned a trailer house. We were paying for it.

RS: Were you involved in farming or business operations prior to that time?

GB: No.

RS: You were working then at Manwaring Construction, Inc.?

GB: Yes, as a carpenter.

RS: When they began work on the Teton Dam, there was a certain amount of controversy. Were you aware of the controversy?

GB: Yes.

RS: Did you have any feelings regarding it?

GB: I thought the Teton Dam was a good idea for the farmers, I wasn't too sure about the site.

RS: Overall, you generally supported it?

GB: Yes.

RS: Did you or your family have any premonition of the flood?

GB: No.

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

GB: We were looking at a car in Sugar City to take up to my dad's.

RS: Do you remember how you found out that the dam had broken?

GB: A lady across the street came over and said that the Teton Dam had broken, we were to leave town.

RS: What was your reaction?

GB: We couldn't believe it at first. I thought it must be true because her husband worked up there and he was the one that called her.

RS: What did you anticipate?

GB: I thought as I walked down to the trailer house that there might be water up to the bottom of the trailer, up underneath the axles and stuff. I didn't anticipate too much. I

picked up the garden tools and laid them on the porch because I didn't figure they would be washed away there. Boy, everything was gone.

RS: Did you try to save any household belongings from your trailer?

GB: No, not really. We had grabbed a few sleeping bags and tent that we had just received. A few things like that and a hunting rifle.

RS: You didn't think you would be gone too long?

GB: I didn't know. I didn't think so. I didn't know what to expect either.

RS: Where did you go and what did you do?

GB: My aunt and uncle of my grandfathers, were just about ready to leave and we decided to go tell them, and see if they needed help. Glenda's aunt was out of town and one of the girls was at her house so we went over there to get her. We picked her up and came back to our house. By that time, my brother-in-law came and he had a grain truck. He came up from Teton Valley and we had a little black Shetland. We loaded up the Shetland on the grain truck and hauled him out. That's about all we saved.

RS: Where did you go?

GB: We went up onto the hill by the water tower. I told Glenda and my brother-in-law to take the kids and go on down through Swan Valley to get to Victor. That way they would all be safe and have a good place to spend the night. I stayed around Rexburg and went back in and helped moved a few things from the Heritage shop. I moved the trailer house up by Blair Manwaring where we lived in it for a couple of months after the flood.

RS: What was the general mood of the people?

GB: As a general rule, I think everybody's attitude was good. They didn't know what to expect, but they were looking at it with a few tears. In a sense, it was like a big thing. Everybody wanted to be where they could see and know what was going on. As a general rule, I think everybody was trying to help everybody else.

RS: So at this point you sent your wife and family back over the Teton Valley?

GB: Yes.

RS: Did you register anywhere or did you go right over to the Heritage shops and start working?

GB: After I sent my family, I went right down to the Heritage shops. I don't think we ever did register. They had us on a missing list and I don't know how they ever figured that we were safe, but they took us off the list.

RS: Did you see the flood coming?

GB: Yes, we were working on Blair Manwaring's new home and he had the transit there and you could see out in the valley. We couldn't tell where the water was until all of a sudden everything was brown. The green trees were still sticking up, but it was brown and nothing else around. We looked through with the transit and we could see stuff floating on it. After that, we moved down into town to be closer and watched it come into town

RS: What were you thinking about when you saw the flood going through the valley?

GB: I thought, "Well I don't have a trailer house anymore or anything else to worry about in Sugar City."

RS: Did it dawn on you then that your trailer was probably gone?

GB: Yes, I think so. I didn't really think there was anything to go back to. I didn't think if there was anything left it would be worth salvaging, especially with a trailer house.

RS: You went down and watched it run through the city of Rexburg?

GB: Yes.

RS: How would you describe it? What kinds of things did you notice?

GB: One of the things I remember was the Grover family standing right by the north end of the girls dorms and their house just picked up and floated across the street. They were standing there and they got pretty shook up about that. They were glad to be together. There was a few people that moved part way on the hill and parked their vehicles and walked the rest of the way up on the hill and the flood came up and washed their cars away. They were frustrated. It was kind of interesting. There was a big propane tank floating in the street, water was rushing around it. It was sitting there spinning around, moving back and forth and the water couldn't float it away. It just stayed there. It was spraying propane out of it. We were watching the Heritage plant, it had all the Heritage home bundled up. We watched new homes that were all bundled up ready for delivery just float off and a bunk of 2x4's and a bunk of plywood. Everything washed off down there.

RS: What do you think about a situation like that? The city is gone, there is no hope, sort of like flushing the toilet?

GB: No, I didn't really think that it was all gone. I figured that it would be pretty much the same type of life as there was before. I didn't really anticipate how much work there would be to restore it. Especially to how it was before the flood.

RS: Did you have any miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

GB: No, I don't think so, not really.

RS: Did you see any animals trying to escape the floodwaters or those who had been entrapped by the floodwater?

GB: Yes, I saw a few animals floating down the flood waters, around the streets. But at that time, there wasn't too much that could be done about it. Later on in the evening, when the water receded, there were animals caught out in the river beds, north and east of town in the willows and we tried to pull a few of them out. There were a couple of kids I was working with the shop that were renting Glenda's mom's home. One thing that was kind of funny, two friends, one was a returned missionary, Glen, and the other one, Greg, had just been, either baptized or was going to be baptized. They each had a car and Greg had an old 1960 car, it wasn't worth too- Glen had a Volkswagen. It was a good new station wagon. At the time, we told them that the flood was coming and they each had a motorcycle and they said, "What shall we do with our bikes?" I had just bought a new pickup so I said, "stick them in my old pickup." We could drive it over to town so they said they would do that. We went about the other things that we needed to do before we left Sugar City and these two boys crawled in the old car and drove to Rexburg. They knew girls up by the college that they knew would need help. They were in the lower basement of this apartment. They helped these girls move up to the upper apartment and then they tried to go back to Sugar City. The cops wouldn't let them go in so their station wagon was still there and my pickup and two motor bikes. When the floodwater receded, we went back in, it must have been Sunday morning, we looked all over for the vehicles. We went to their house and it was still there. Greg and Glen picked up a few of their belongings and put them up. Our house was gone and the tools that I had thrown on my porch, I found them strung out through our place and across the neighbors. I decided how the trailer house and what way it must have floated. It would have been worse off. We looked for the trailer house, the car and pickup. We saw where the trailer house had probably run into another house and had floated into it and settled down and skidded on its axles where I took the tires off before the flood. It didn't have any tires. You could follow the axle marks across the dirt and across the pavement. It looked like it had hit another house. Apparently, when it hit the other house or the house just beyond it had disintegrated. At that point, more or less, I quit looking for the house. You couldn't see anything in that direction. We walked on down a couple of miles out into the Sugar-Salem area and we kept finding trailer houses and would see one that would look like ours and we'd go walk out in the mud and try to find it. When we got tired, we went back to Rexburg. It was a couple of days after the flood, we were cleaning out the house that they had been living in and where our trailer used to be, there was a pile of garbage about twenty feet high. Where our trailer house used to be

there is a crop of trees and an alley and a house behind us. This pile of garbage was brought up to the roofline of the house behind us and was about 50 to 150 feet long. I was walking over there looking for stuff that may have been washed out of my garage. I spotted this little blue spot in between this debris. I moved a couple of boards and this was the cab of my pickup. I went back in and told the two boys that if they would hurry up and get that front room cleaned out, I would tell them where their bikes were. They all shoveled real hard and we went out there to the pile of garbage and I showed them the corner of my pickup and so they uncovered it. They got the bed uncovered and there was part of another shed on it and their motor bikes was underneath that. They dug them out. That night we hauled them back to Driggs and took them to the sports shop and they overhauled them. They started riding them again after the flood.

RS: They didn't suffer too much damage then?

GB: They ran but they didn't run extremely well. Little things kept going wrong with them.

RS: Then where did you stay that Saturday evening?

GB: The first night, the day of the flood, we pulled this camper trailer that we used sometimes for an office and sometimes when we went out of town we lived in it. That's where we stayed that first night, me and Greg and Glen.

RS: Both of them had been working for Manwaring's?

GB: They had been working for Heritage which is two different organizations but all under the same president. Blair and his wife, Joann, we ate with them that night. I guess we wandered around and tried to help the lost cattle and see if we could help anybody. We did that until night and it got too dark to do anything, so we spent a restless night listening to the helicopters and everything fly over. We got a little bit of sleep. The next morning, Blair took us in his suburban and we found a way into town and went by the Sugar City Cemetery. Just as we were getting there, a few of the guys from Sugar City that owned businesses and more or less some of the prominent people were floating a boat across the river right below the bridge. They took the boat across and wouldn't bring it back to let us across. The bridge was partially intact, there was, if I remember, it had been washed out on each side and there were some posts and boards that had floated down and had been hung up there along the road. We threw them across and Blair had some nails and a hammer and we built us a bridge across the first span and then across the second span until we got across to the road. We meandered through the puddles and streams until we came into Sugar City.

RS: You walked through?

GB: Yes, we walked through.

RS: What was the condition of Sugar City? What did you see?

GB: A mess, everyplace you went. One thing I remember before I got to Sugar City, there was a big, big masonry fireplace that had been washed out into the middle of this field. There was no home or anything around it. The fire box and a big part of the masonry, concrete work, was just sitting out in the middle of this field with tractors and everything dumped all over. When we entered Sugar City, there was guns and any household items, more or less, you wanted to see just laying all over the streets. Shovels in front of the houses and behind houses. In the newer section, the Sonderegger addition, most of those home in there were gone and destroyed and in a pile against a couple of other homes. There wasn't very much left there. Our place was on the other side of town behind the Sugar Mercantile, north of the Mercantile, there was just everything. New things, old things, they had washed out of houses and out of stores, just general chaos.

RS: Was it depressing?

GB: No, not the first time it wasn't depressing. It was more or less interesting to me to see what had happened and to see how the water had been. The destruction as we went back to try work on Glenda's mom's house it was very depressing. She was quite glad that our trailer house, in a sense, was washed away because it was gone.

RS: Were you expecting to see your trailer house gone?

GB: Yes.

RS: As you walked to your general area, you didn't really anticipate seeing it?

GB: I really didn't anticipate it. I came to a knowledge of a little bit of hope, but I didn't anticipate seeing it.

RS: What did your place look like when you got there?

GB: The garden, there used to be a garden in front of the trailer house and there was a car sitting out in the middle of it. It was completely covered with silt except for a couple of tomato plants and green pepper plants. There was just a big pile of garbage from where approximately the trailer house had been set back by the neighbors. There was a big barn that we had been trying to tear down and the roof was knocked down and we thought it would go anytime. It had two big doors, in the front and back, and I had the two in the back sealed off. They were against the alley so people couldn't get in and the kids couldn't play in there. The flood came along and washed the two front doors and the two back doors open and it just created a canal for the water to go right through and it didn't hurt the barn at all. It was in as good of shape as before the flood.

RS: What did you lose?

GB: Everything that we had. The thing that was the hardest to replace was the pictures and things of that sort. Genealogy, Book of Remembrances. That was the thing that

now after a year or so we are still missing the most. Most of the other stuff has been replaced. You forget about it. Every once in awhile, you will remember and go look. You don't have it and then you remember that the flood took it.

RS: As you look at this, the house is gone, you looked around and you couldn't find your place, all your belongings were gone, were you concerned?

GB: No, not at first. I don't know what we had in mind. We weren't too concerned about replacing it. I think maybe I felt sorry for some of the older people who had all their lives they had saved and kept things from their childhood and their younger lives from when they were first married to their kids. That was all gone. I don't know how they would ever replace some things. I wasn't too upset.

RS: Did you have any idea that the government would come through and claim responsibility?

GB: No, I didn't. I thought when it was brought up it would be nice, but I didn't really plan on it. In a sense, I think the government came through and was quite fair on some of the things. Their inspectors didn't understand. Like, when people get married around here as a general rule they have a reception and there are a lot of items given and sometimes there are duplications of mixers and frying pans and sometimes three or four. This was the place that we felt the government hit us the hardest on our claim, was that the inspector at our place thought that the only way that you could acquire these type of gifts was to have a rich parent or rich uncle that would buy us those. Our inspector was from Texas and he had no idea of the LDS type of receptions. That's the thing our household belongings got cut off on our reimbursement. One thing about our trailer was we had a home teacher that lived on the southwest of us about a block and a half and he was building a brand new home about a half mile from his present home. Apparently, when the flood went through that put his new home in line with the floodwaters that took trailer house. We sent down and found a trailer house frame and a few items. We walked down through that way and that home teacher with one of his kids had found our Book of Remembrance and had it sitting on the front porch of their new home. That was kind of interesting. It had our births and blessing certificates and the death certificate of the child that we lost.

RS: It was kind of special then?

GB: Yes, it was.

RS: When did you find your home?

GB: We found it Sunday afternoon when Glenda came back from the valley. She found it. There was a metal frame that supported the trailer and about a third of the sub floor. There were some dishes and a few things that we found in a ditch.

RS: Not much you could salvage though?

GB: There was very little salvage. There was a fence nearby and my wife's house robe was there and a pair of my garments, a few things like that. Nothing that would really sustain you for very long.

RS: Did you continue to stay in the Manwaring trailer or did you find something else?

GB: Yes, we did until we received our HUD trailer house.

RS: When was that?

GB: About August. I'm not sure.

RS: You stayed there in that trailer for about two months then?

GB: Yes.

RS: What kind of cleanup operations on your own property were there? The trailer was wiped out so obviously you didn't have to clean up the place.

GB: There was Glenda's mom's home. She lived in Victor and had been remarried and moved back to Victor. We did a little bit of cleanup on it. We didn't really feel that it was worth salvaging. We had a garage that was behind the trailer house and it had floated into a couple of the apple trees we had there. The back side had floated up and a lot of stuff had been forced out but there was an attic built in the top of it and we stored a few items in it. We had our Christmas decorations and ornaments in the top of it. We had no way of getting into it except the roof. We took a chain saw and took the roof out and we found a few items in there like Christmas and a few of my saddles and bridles. A few tools, not very much. I had some new concrete tools that I had bought the day before and they had all been washed away. They had never been used yet. That was kind of disheartening.

RS: As you got with this cleanup operation in trying to get reestablished, was there any problem that you found to be very frustrating? Any situations that were difficult?

GB: I don't think so. We didn't have too much mud to shovel. We would more or less walk away and let the big machinery come in and take care of it at the time.

RS: Did you receive any help in cleaning up your property?

GB: Our immediate family came out from Teton Valley and helped. They came out about three days and helped us a little bit with our personal belongings. They helped clean the garage out and Glenda's mom's home. That was about all the help that we received.

RS: Did you have any unusual or uplifting experiences during this cleanup operation?

GB: No, no that I can personally say for ourselves. By working at the schools, during that time, we were building so the schools could start, there were some people who came in and took care of the jobs that nobody else wanted to do before the flood, like labor and jackhammer work. These guys worked all day long running jackhammers and hauling concrete out of the buildings in wheelbarrows. They never seemed to get tired. At nights when I went home, I just went home and went to bed. I was so tired I didn't know how they did it. Many of them came from different walks of life other than construction and they were extremely well sustained to do that kind of work while not being used to it.

RS: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or looting?

GB: No, we didn't have anything to be looted. What little or few things we found, we could pile in the back of the pickup with us.

RS: Did you receive any government aid immediately after the flood?

GB: Yes, they supplied us with food stamps after about three or four days to last about four weeks worth of groceries. From the actual government, I believe that was about all. The Red Cross came in and helped us. Right after the flood, Glenda stayed in Victor for a couple of days and I drove back and forth and they helped furnish us with gas and bought us and the kids a couple of sets of cloths to wear. That was extremely appreciated at the time. It still is. I think that I was really impressed that they came in and were so fast in helping.

RS: Did you receive and other aid from other groups, church groups or other volunteer organizations?

GB: The church welfare program helped us to get more clothes, garments, and things like that. That was about all.

RS: I understand that they were serving meals in Sugar City at the chapel or some facility, the school, or somewhere. Did you eat there?

GB: When we were in Sugar City, there were times when we did. Sometimes, when we were in the trailer house, we cooked our own meals in the trailer. It wasn't really equipped for too much cooking. We used a little camping stove to do most of our cooking at home.

RS: Which of the government agencies did you deal with during the recovery operations?

GB: I don't think we dealt with any of them except for the HUD trying to get a trailer house.

RS: Did you have to deal with the Bureau of Reclamation?

GB: For our claim we did.

RS: How would you evaluate their effectiveness, both HUD and the BOR?

GB: HUD I really wasn't too impressed. The Bureau of Reclamation seemed to file our claim pretty rapidly and were on the ball. They had a little bit more time to become organized where HUD moved in right away and was trying to do something but they didn't know what they were trying to do.

RS: Did you have any trouble getting a trailer from them?

GB: I don't know if we had any more trouble than anybody else. It seemed to take quite a long time and we never did know just when it was coming. We didn't have a site picked out. They got lost in town on directions, places, and time schedules never seemed to work out. Considering the mass confusion, I think they probably did as well a job as could be expected.

RS: Did you put your trailer on your property there in Sugar City or did you live in the HUD villages?

GB: No, we lived in Rexburg. We moved our trailer house in by the lumber and stuff that was used to build Heritage homes so we could keep an eye on that. Our boss set us up there. In a sense it helped him out and yet it helped us both. We both benefited from it.

RS: Did you deal with county or state agencies?

GB: I don't think so.

RS: Did you feel that any who assisted in the recovery operations might have taken advantage of you or the government?

GB: I don't think anybody took advantage of us to speak of. As for the people that came into help, I don't think any of them took advantage of the government. I'm sure that probably there were some people in the flood that tried to use the government as a means to improve or better themselves. Nobody that I could really point a finger at and say that they were in the wrong.

RS: Without divulging any names, were you aware of anyone that might have filled a fraudulent flood claim?

GB: No.

RS: When did you decided to rebuild out in the Sugar City area or establish your trailer back in Sugar City?

GB: Well, the property we were staying on belonged to Glenda's mom. We wanted to buy it. At the time they didn't really want to sell it. They didn't know if they would

need it in the future for a home or something. We started looking around for some place to buy a little land and acreage, some place where we could put our refund money back into something that would profit us in the end, and not put ourselves in debt for property and a new home, and to try to keep ourselves out of debt as much as possible.

RS: How do you feel about the flood now? Was it the Lord's punishment, a natural disaster or a man-made disaster?

GB: I don't know. I don't think it was a punishment from the Lord. I think that the Lord watched over the whole flood to the extent that lives weren't lost, the timing was perfect in a sense for it to happen. It couldn't have happened at a better time. If it would have happened in the winter, there would have been an uncountless number of people who would have lost their lives from exposure, and many other types of death. When they moved in the HUD trailer houses, the electricians that were laid out at the site, the plumbers who were laid off and on strike they all came in and helped in their own trades to help rebuild the community. There just wasn't enough of these people around to fill the needs that needed to be met at that time. Overall, I think the Lord was there. I think the people that turned in their claims more of a judgment, that will be used as a judgment rather than a curse, see how honest they were and how well they treated their neighbor. I don't know what the flood was caused by anything in particular, just something that happened.

RS: You have no hostile feelings towards the engineers or the builders of the dam?

GB: No, I don't. I think they probably did everything to the best of their knowledge.

RS: Did you feel that the dam should be rebuilt?

GB: Yes, I don't know about the same site or something like that or as big, but I do believe that the dam needs to be rebuilt for its original purposes. As a means of irrigation for the farmers. That's what this community lives on. If the farmers are gone, there is nothing else. So in a farming community that is where the money comes from.

RS: Has the disaster changed your life at all?

GB: Yes, I think so. I think it has helped us to have a broader look on life. We are more alert of the things around us.

RS: Did your family have any ill-effects?

GB: No, I would think that it has helped us.

RS: In what way?

GB: Spiritually, it helped us tremendously financially I believe. We are a lot farther ahead now than we were before the flood. I think that it put us in an area that we enjoy living in. We like where we are living at now. If it hadn't been for the flood, I don't think we would have moved into the Lyman area.

RS: Thank you very much, Mr. Bagley.