

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

# Layle Bagley – Life during the Teton Flood

By Layle Bagley

July 12, 1977

## Box 5 Folder 11

Oral Interview conducted by Fremont Fuller

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin      May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Fremont Fullmer: What is your name?

Layle Bagley: Layle Bagley.

FF: Will you spell it, please.

FF: How old are you?

LB: Thirty-eight.

FF: Do you have a family? How many were living at the home at the time of the flood?

LB: My wife and I and three children.

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

LB: We lived on Route 2, Rexburg. That's in the Salem area.

FF: What is your present address?

LB: Same.

FF: What do you do for a living?

LB: I manage Teton Traveler Manufacturing.

FF: How long have you lived in this area?

LB: About thirty-five years.

FF: Did you own your own home?

LB: Yes.

FF: And did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?

LB: I supported it.

FF: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?

LB: Not a bit.

FF: Where were you and your family when the Teton Dam broke?

LB: We were at the high school rodeo out in Salmon.

FF: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed?

LB: Couldn't believe it.

FF: Did you try to save any household belongings?

LB: No, we were so far away, we didn't get a chance to get back home.

FF: Did you see the flood coming?

LB: No.

FF: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed, what preparations to save your property or business did you undertake?

LB: None.

FF: In vacating the area where you live, tell what happened to you and your family.

LB: We weren't in the area.

FF: Did you see any animals trying to escape the flood waters?

LB: No.

FF: Where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood?

LB: We stayed with my sister out in Parker.

FF: Did you continue to stay at your home during the cleanup?

LB: No.

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

LB: We never did.

FF: What was the damage you suffered as a result of the flood? What was the most cherished item you lost in the flood?

LB: Well, we lost everything in the flood, our home and our animals, and almost all our belongings, corrals, buildings, the whole place went. I don't know what would be the most cherished item. We had a handmade rock table that we cherished quite a bit that we built. We had a lot of semi-precious stones and had in it and we lost that.

FF: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the flood waters roll through the area?

LB: We didn't see it.

FF: How did you go about cleaning up your property?

LB: We really didn't have much left to clean up.

FF: What were some of the problems with which you were confronted? Problems that have you frustrations.

LB: Well, transportation was a bad problem for a while, all the road washed out, gullies and holes and stuff. One of the frustrations we faced, or I faced was finding some clothes to wear. I ended up with just what I had on my back. I happen to wear large sizes and I couldn't find a fifty coat or a size eighteen shirt or a size twelve shoe anywhere in town.

FF: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

LB: Yes, several.

FF: Would you like to describe it?

LB: Well, we had several experiences where I guess you would say, close calls or what not.

FF: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

LB: Oh, we had a few things picked up by some of the workers and crews that came in from the government. Some of the contractors, HUD contractors, we missed some tools and things but other than that nothing serious.

FF: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

LB: Oh, we had Red Cross aid which was good and food stamps. I guess that's a lot of things they handed out, things like this.

FF: Did you receive any assistance from the Latter-day Saints or any other church group immediately after the flood?

LB: Yes.

FF: Did you receive any assistance from the Red Cross or any other independent organization?

LB: Yes.

FF: What government agencies did you deal with during the recovery operations? Evaluate their efficiency.

LB: WE had a lot of dealings with HUD, and afterwards with a claim to the Bureau of Reclamation. We had some dealings with the Red Cross. Yeah, the ASCS, we had a lot of dealings with those too, to clean up the ground.

FF: Did you have any dealings with county or state authorities and law enforcement officers during the flood?

LB: Just through the ASCS, we had some dealings with those people.

FF: Do you feel any who assisted recovery operations took advantage of the government, especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it? Please do not divulge names.

LB: No, no I didn't feel that way at all. I think some of the early truck contractors came in and the people followed, the amount that they were paid for the job was quite extreme, but I didn't know of any particular case where it was outlandish.

FF: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

LB: No.

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

LB: Well, it was a man-made disaster, there's no question about that.

FF: Do you feel that the dam should be built again? If so, would it be built in the same place?

LB: Oh, I think they ought to build it right back where it was at.

FF: How did the Teton disaster change your life?

LB: Turned us completely upside down and changed everything about us.

FF: Okay, now, if you've got any special thing you want to talk about, any stories, or any particular incidents you want to reveal, it's all yours.

LB: Well, I suppose I had some experiences that maybe ought to be recorded some place. I mentioned we were out to Salem at the rodeo when it hit. We were eating dinner there and we got word from some of the people that finished before we did that the dam

had broken. We couldn't really believe it. Really we didn't get too excited about it until after we thought about it a little while and started hearing the news reports. Finally, we got kind of excited.

I got in the car with Jim Nilsson and his wife, Pat; Ken Phillips and his wife, Janet. I left Glenda there with the camper and the pickup, to bring the horses and horse trailer back, the kids back. And we took off for home. All the way across the desert we were hearing reports about every five minutes over the radio that the dam had broken. They called the sheriff just before we went and he said, "Yes, the dam had broken" and they expected the town to be wiped out. I kind of hope all the way until we got a radio announcement and they said that there was a wall of water coming through Rexburg, eight foot deep and six miles wide. Then I knew. Then I knew that was probably the end of everything I owned. Pat and Jim Nilsson had their children, none of them old enough to drive were left there alone. So we were pretty frantic to get to see if they were all right.

So we came in and had to go clear up to Kilgore and back to get to Austin Price's [that] was [as] far as we could get from the flood waters. We did get to the Nilsson home and it didn't get touched with the flood. A lot of neighbors came and took the kids out.

I took an airplane ride, had them take me to St. Anthony and bummed a ride on a airplane and flew over our area. It's just impossible to describe the feeling and look at the destruction that had taken place. I kept hoping that our home would still be there. Just anything still there. And when we flew over, I saw the neighbor's home, Val Ball's, was still in place. Mine wasn't; it was gone. It was mashed up into the trees. And that was quite a time, that that evening and that night I just can't describe the heartbreak and the tears, and the just the emotion that ran through a person's mind, the nightmare that you couldn't believe. You kept thinking you'd wake up and it would be just a bad dream, but it wasn't.

The day following the flood, I got on a horse, and rode down thinking I could cross the river. But the water was too deep and too wild. I ended up working my way down to Jerry Harris' place and then some people came along in a little boat. Val Ball and I got a ride across the river and walked into our homes. I couldn't get in my house. It was mashed into the trees. Finally, by kicking a hole in the wall, where a big pole had run through, I was able to get inside the house. The damage there was indescribable, the mud and the mess. I worked and stirred around there and picked up a few things I could that was mainly clothes and some old suitcases for the kids and started packing them back to the river.

We sat on the river bank, Ralph Madsen, and Vall Ball and I for over three hours watching helicopters fly all around us. None of them would land and help us get back across the river. Finally, we waved and waved and one of the helicopters landed. We asked him to take us across the river and they said, "No, we're not running any damn taxi service for you guys. You want a ride, get in and we'll take you back to Rexburg but we're not taking you across the river." They said, "The only reason we landed is 'cause

we thought you had a body there.” Ralph Madsen had some things wrapped up in a blanket and they thought it was a body.

So we set there for a couple more hours, I guess. It started towards evening and we decided that the only way we’d get across was just somebody go swim the river. There was a boat that we saw mashed up in the trees on the other side and we thought that one of us could get over we could bring the boat back.

We started up the stream and Ralph Madsen was going to do the swimming. I don’t know what happened; to this day I don’t know why it ended up me swimming instead of Ralph, but I went up. The river had made a new channel and it had come down through Jerry Harris’ field and the old and new channel came together with big rapids and went down towards where the bridge had been. I crossed the new channel and was starting to work my way up the river a ways, I was going to walk quite always upstream. The river was running about like the Snake does at high water in the spring. But as I started to work my way upstream, the whole bank gave way underneath me and I fell in between the two rivers. I swam and swam and swam until I got almost to the side and got some willows and grabbed the willows and they pulled out and then I went down through the big white water areas where they came together. I was wearing a pair of boots, cowboy boots, and they came partially off and one of them did. I had to kick it off so I could swim a little bit. And finally, I ran out of, just plain ran out off so I could swim a little bit. And finally, I ran out of, just plain ran out of energy. I couldn’t raise my arm and I figured, well, that’s it so I just kind of relaxed and wend down under the water and was swept down through the current. I just kind of figured that was the end, and all I could say was, “Oh Lord, help me.” I started a kicking and a fighting, and I came up and got another breath and swam for a few more seconds. Then again, I ran out of energy and I couldn’t do anything so I just gave up and floated down through the water and figured that was the end of it. My feet hit bottom now, I don’t know how far downstream I went, but when I stood up, my head came out of the water. I managed to crawl out on a mud bank on the other side. I took, I guess, they said about twenty minutes before I could get up enough money to even roll over. And I had to work my way out through the mud over to the boat. I was so tired, and the boat was a big boat when I got there. I finally made it to the Road where Dale Crawford took the horse home for me and Norma Lee Harris loaded me up and took me back where we were staying at my sister’s place. That was quite an experience to go through.

FF: I’ll say. Is there anything else?

LB: Oh, we had some quite interesting experiences. I had six head of horses that got swept away. The next morning after the flood, the one horse was home, another one, a little pony that belonged to my boy, Lane, this little horse came up through the field just on a dead trot right for home that afternoon. And the day after the flood we had a little two month colt that we assumed to be dead. It was about three days later we found him down in Hibbard, in a corral down at Griffith’s. He’d been cut up pretty bad and his woulds were fly blown and he never had a halter on him so we had a problem getting him home. Took us about three days later and we found his mother and another mare.

I have a big Apaloosa horse, we never could find him. We hunted up and down all over and I walked down through the river bottom and just looked at all the dead animals there was. Even after they were supposed to clean up all the dead animals within a half mile below our place there was over twenty dead animals laying down, in every pile of brush around every tree had dead animals in it.

But finally two weeks and one day after the flood, he came home. He came up through the field, kind of spooky. It was a Sunday afternoon and I decided to ride him, ride him out to where our other horses were kept out in Nilsson's. so I got on him with just a halter and rope around his neck. He was a little bit jumpy and spooky and we got down to Fred Shirley's place and decided to cut through the field or he wanted to so I let him. He got out I the soft mud and I guess he had a lot of soft mud experience. He ran away with me. I couldn't hold him. He headed out the driveway, headed out towards the oil road and there was a little pile of gravel someone had dumped there and I thought that was a good place to land, so I piled off that horse and that horse kept going at full run. I didn't hit the pile of gravel like I planned. I sailed over it and hit into the driveway and skidded out into the road on my side. I weighed at the time I guess about 260 pounds and think of that much coming off a horse going that fast. I skidded out and kind of banged up my shoulder and spent some time getting over that.

And I had another experience that was quite interesting. When we finally got a double wide trailer to move in and we set it up ourselves. We were driving the well down with the backhoe. I had railroad ties holding both sides of the pipe, driving with the backhoe. As it was being driven down, the pipe broke and mashed my arm between the railroad ties and the dipper on the back of the bucket. I wasn't sure whether I had my arm cut off or just mashed to pieces or all broke up or what. When I got my shirt undone I could see there were some problems there. There was a bump sticking up on my arm so we went to the doctor. It turned out that I didn't even have a broken bone in my arm, just muscle spasms, but my arm swelled up like a big purple ham for about a couple of months after that. It seem like I had a lot experiences.

I don't think anybody can really recognize the hell we went through. The sheer hell that people suffered. The strain and the mental anguish and the questioning and the decisions and the unknowing of everything. We didn't know whether there would be any payment made. We didn't know what to do next. I think I never talked to one flood victim who would repeat it for any amount of money or for any type of reward. Isn't anyone who wants to ever got through that experience again for any price. It's just not worth anything you'd ever offer us.

FF: Thank you.