

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Max Brown – Life during the Teton Flood

By Max Brown

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Box 5 Folder 26

Oral Interview conducted by Richard Stallings

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

RS: Max, will you please spell your full name?

MB: Max Wilford Brown.

RS: Where were you born?

MB: Idaho Falls, Idaho.

RS: How long have you lived in the Rexburg area?

MB: Since 1947.

RS: Max, do you have a family?

MB: Yes.

RS: What size?

MB: We have six children, my wife and I.

RS: What is your address?

MB: 22 West 2nd South, Rexburg, Idaho.

RS: Was this family that you described all living in this home prior to the flood?

MB: No, we have a new baby that was just born in February.

RS: Is this the same home that you are living in today?

MB: Yes, this is the same home, with slight modification.

RS: Max, what do you do for a living?

MB: I teach at Ricks College, in the business department.

RS: Do you own your own home?

MB: Well, myself and the bank.

RS: Are you involved in any kind of business or farming ventures in this area?

MB: I dabble with a little accounting on the side, but nothing else.

RS: Did you own any other property?

MB: I did at the time; I had my mother's estate located at 247 North 2nd West.

RS: When they considered building the Teton Dam, a controversy arose over whether it should be built or not, were you aware of this controversy?

MB: No, I wasn't here at that time.

RS: The controversy seemed to intensify the last year or two as groups tried to have the federal courts to stop, did you have any feelings of that type?

MB: If you mean in opposition to the dam, no. I felt safe with the dam, I felt it was necessary.

RS: Why?

MB: Oh, I felt that for irrigation purposes alone, it would be good, even though there might be a less number of people involved, I still thought personally, it was essential.

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

MB: No, not that I'm aware of.

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

MB: We were in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was going back to an army school during the summer.

RS: How did you hear about the collapse of the dam?

MB: My in-laws called from California and they told us, and that was the first we had heard about it. They called and they talked to my wife first, she answered the phone and they wouldn't talk to her. They wanted to talk to me. They said to me when I answered the phone, "Have you heard about the news in Rexburg?" I said, "Rexburg! What could be the news in Rexburg?" And they told us.

RS: What was your reaction?

MB: Mostly disbelief at that time. We really didn't feel that anything very disastrous could happen to us. So we turned on the TV and there wasn't any news in Indianapolis until 11:00 that night about the dam. And then it showed just break of the dam and that's it, several shots of that. But it said on the news broadcast that Sugar City was completely wiped out and Rexburg was completely wiped out and Idaho Falls was being flooded, expecting to evacuate.

RS: What did you think?

MB: At that point we thought, this is quite a serious situation. We were quite shocked. I guess more stunned than anything else. We were numb not really knowing what happened. And so we got on the telephone and tried to call Idaho Falls. My sister and brother-in-law live there and we couldn't get through at first so we dialed the telephone, hung up and dialed and hung up for about 45 minutes till we finally got through. Then he explained, he had been up there Sunday and pulled our carpets up so that the floors were at least relatively dry, and that we ought to get home as soon as we could.

RS: Did he describe to you the damage that the country was suffering?

MB: Yes, he did quite eloquently. And it was, I guess at that point we became closer to reality than we had been before, that something really had taken place that there was damage.

RS: So until you made that phone call, you didn't know exactly what the status was?

MB: That's correct. At that point, we still didn't know exactly what the status was?

RS: That's correct. At that point, we still didn't because even though he described some of it wasn't the same as seeing it.

RS: So then what did you do?

MB: Well at that point, I came home. I arranged for a leave with the military and arranged for the Red Cross to obtain verification from my brother-in-law and sister that there really was a flood so that the military could release me. I left Monday morning on a plane to Idaho Falls. I arrive there late Monday night, came up here Tuesday morning.

RS: When people in Indiana knew that you were from Rexburg, didn't they express any sympathy?

MB: Oh you bet, everybody, military, members of the church, everybody was very sympathetic. In fact, the first sergeant that I had to arrange with, bent over backwards to get me free so I could come out here. There was not problem at all. In fact, I think Rexburg had become at that point, at least had become a byword, everybody knew where Rexburg, Idaho was.

RS: So then you flew out, what were you expecting as you were flying home?

MB: I'm not really sure. Most of the time coming out on the plane, we were talking to people on the plane about the flood. They were concerned about it when they found out that I lived in Rexburg. It was all like, "What happened to you?" and so forth. I didn't know and they didn't know. The pilot on the plane tried to communicate by radio with the Idaho Falls airport to see if there was some kind of communication, there wasn't any kind of telephone communication. In fact, they couldn't find out anything. They said you will just have to wait till you get there before I could find out. They weren't even

sure we could get from the airport to downtown Idaho Falls. It was kind of a traumatic experience coming out on the place not knowing exactly what there was going to be.

When we came in, we came into Salt Lake and then took a flight from there. A relation of the young man that was drowned, was that Chambers? Well, it was a close relation, a sister or a sister-in-law or something of this nature, was on the plane. She got on at Salt Lake and was coming up. There was number of people that were coming up to help. I can't remember names. That made it more exciting there because nobody knew what was actually happening. Newspapers down in Salt Lake still said it was a total disaster. Everybody was wiped out, there were snakes in the streets.

RS: Weren't the radio stations, the news accounts saying that hundreds were dead?

MB: Oh eventually, you bet. They had the death rate quite high. I don't recall what it was. They had the death rate high and they had the property damage high, they had everything distorted, they were something else.

RS: So you got off the plane, did you have any trouble in getting up here, up to Rexburg?

MB: There was no problem getting up to Idaho Falls. My brother-in-law drove up with me on Tuesday morning, and we had not trouble getting through. I showed them my driver's license and they let us through the road block. When we got out to Rexburg we went directly out to my mother's, where my mother's place was. And that's quite interesting. When we arrived there, all that was left was the foundation, a cement foundation and a foundation of water from a broken water main. There right in front of the foundation where she had her flowers, the flowers were still that just blooming so beautifully wondering if anything had happened. But that property was a complete loss. We found a door, we found a piece of the heater, and we found a piece of shingle or sliding off the wall and that was it, completely.

RS: And then you went to your home?

MB: Well, we went round and looked at some of the things in the city of people that we knew to see how they had come out in the flood. At Bishop Pieper's he had a great huge gas tank right between his house and his neighbor's house, Angie Lyman. They don't know how it got there, but it was setting right between the houses. We stopped and talked with them for a few minutes and talked to a couple of people on the street. Then we came home, over to our house.

RS: Would you describe your property?

MB: Well, we probably weren't really seriously damaged, we were real lucky. We were on the edge of the flood. The flood went across the street and covered the football field. The time I arrived, it was still about, I would guess, about four foot of water in the basement and then just mud and gook all over. The first thing that we did was start

upstairs and we took all the carpets out. To get those up you had cut them up to pieces and drag them out the front door into the street. Then we cleaned out some of the furniture and things upstairs.

RS: What was your impression of the community Max, that Tuesday?

MB: In terms of people, it seemed like there was a numbness in some and an anxious wanting-to-get-with-it in others. The flood is over now, but let's get the job of getting it cleaned up now. I think mostly the elderly were the ones that felt kind of numb about it, and I suspect the reason for it was because they lost everything that they had worked for all their lives and weren't quite sure where to go from there. The town was kind of jumpy, and everything. There was people all over scrubbing and cleaning pumps going. You could hear pumps pumping all around the block. I think it was an exciting time in a way because you felt real close to people probably you haven't even talked to before. There was a guy that came up to the house and the apartment that he runs, the Queens Row and wanted to know if when we got through we would come down and help him with his house. The neighbors were over helping out and we went over and helped them out. I mean you got to know people better than I think you could have any other way.

RS: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experience connected with the flood?

MB: No particularly. There was some odd thing that took place, I don't know if you would call that miraculous or not. We had a velvet picture that we brought back from the Philippines and we hung it on the basement wall, of Christ, and it was completely submerged in water, it would have to had been. But it didn't have a spot of mud on it. After the flood there was nothing on it. My little boy's tricycle was out in the garage when we went to go back east. When we got back after the flood it was down in the furnace room. We found stuff in between walls, between the ceiling, in the kids room where it was paneled, and the floor. We found a can of baking powder, a can of wax, things, like this, probably washed up there but I don't know how they got there but they were there. But I don't know of anything else. Not in our situation anyway.

RS: Were you able to contact your wife and family in that first week when you got home?

MB: No, my wife was with me in Indianapolis.

RS: Oh, they came out with you on the plane?

MB: No, no they were with me in Indianapolis and when I got out there I could call them, there was no problem from calling out in Idaho Falls. I got hold of them.

RS: What was your wife's reaction, do you remember?

MB: Oh, I think until she arrived here in August, she didn't believe what it was. It didn't really hit her. When she first saw it when they came back in August there were tears, you know it was kind of anxious moment, but before that she wasn't too aware of what it was.

RS: Where did you stay when you were cleaning up your property?

MB: Oh, I stayed in Idaho Falls with my brother-in-law.

RS: And you would drive back and forth each day?

MB: Yes, one night I stayed upstairs in our house.

RS: What were the damages that you suffered as a result of the flood?

MB: It wasn't very much. We got a full basement of water so it completely ruined the basement, which included the furnace, and all the paneling. It was a finished apartment there so we had bunk beds and a couch, chairs two or three of those. We had a cabinet that was ruined, an old refrigerator, stove down there that was ruined. Upstairs, it ruined the rug, it was only about nine inches deep upstairs.

RS: Was there any cherished items that you lost?

MB: Well, yes, all our genealogy was downstairs, pictures, things like this that were lost. All of my books, that I accumulated that I had at home and were stored in the furnace room and they were lost. We had copies of the Improvement Era and things like this dating from about 1940, all of my things that I had off my mission that were brought home, souvenirs and things like that were lost. We were rather fortunate when we left, we rented our house to a young couple and four boys, and because we did that, we took a lot of things from downstairs up the very top of the attic and so a lot of the things were up there that were special to us.

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

MB: Well, when I arrived here, my brother-in-law was with me and we worked and he had a pump that's used for pumping fertilizer on farms and he was through with it or was going to be through with it that afternoon so he said he would let us take it next. He brought that over and in the meantime, we got everything out that we could, so it was clean to where you could pump it. Then we pumped it out with that. We also, I guess, it was fortunate that we had two drains in the floor, one in the bathroom, and one in the furnace room downstairs, so we used those to drain the water out. Once we got it diluted down to where it wasn't so thick.

RS: Was that one of the reasons that you only had four or five feet when you got home, was that a lot had drained out?

MB: Yes, I'm sure but it would have gone through the lavatory and through that one drain, that's where a lot of it went.

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

MB: You bet, we had people come from down, there was a family from Logan, a family from Salt Lake, young people from Brigham City, and they were there for three days and we would have never got it done if it wasn't for them. They came in and they helped sweep and shovel and everything, it was great.

RS: Did you know any of these people before the flood?

MB: No, I didn't know any of them at all. One was the institute director, no he wasn't the institute director, he was on the staff of the institute, the LDS Institute of Logan, that came up and his daughter was in school last year.

RS: How did you obtain their help?

MB: They came through the Fourth Ward, the ward was assigning some of the people from out of state and then Bishop Jacobs of the Fourth Ward brought them up to our house.

RS: How long did it take you to clean up your place?

MB: Two weeks, pretty close. By two weeks we had it to where I left for the summer and it just started to dry out and we came back in August and there wasn't a lot to do.

RS: So you were only here working, then to cleanup for two weeks, then you went back to Indiana?

MB: Yes, two weeks was it. Actually it wasn't all cleanup. Some of the time was spent taking care of the application for the SBA loan and things like this. Probably the actual cleanup took ten days.

RS: So that was your plan then to recover to get a Small Business Loan?

MB: That was initially the plan. We thought we had better go that way so that we could get something. But there was no point in doing anything until we got back cause it wouldn't be dry. We were told to let it dry for at least two months. So when we went back there we did.

RS: Did you have any idea that the government would be responsible for this and would recover the pay?

MB: Oh, at that time there was a lot of rumors but we felt that we would do what we had to do. We would get the loan we would do what we had to there, and it the

government came through, great, if they didn't great, but at that point no one know and we didn't know either.

RS: Was there any particular problem that was extremely frustrating to you?

MB: Oh the most frustrating problem that was trying to get the SBA loan. That was easy to claim the first \$5,000 after that it was a little difficult because a lot of people were. But once we reached that point, it was pretty clear that the government would reimburse us all. We used what funds we had to finish rebuilding and then it depended upon our fortunes.

RS: Did you deal with any other government agencies; you mentioned the Small Business loan?

MB: Well, I think like everybody else, that the Red Cross helped out some and obviously the Bureau of Reclamation did. The IRS was there and we gained some information from them like everybody else.

RS: How would you evaluate their effectiveness?

MB: All of the government agencies?

RS: Yes.

MB: I thought the Red Cross did a really fine job. I had some reservations of them prior, because of some of the things that I had heard in the military, but I think they did a tremendous job. The Bureau handled our case and reimbursed great. We didn't have any difficulties at all. I felt good about it. My only complaint about the SBA was the volume of paper work that you had to go through in order to get anything.

RS: Do you have any bitterness towards any of them?

MB: I don't and my wife doesn't. WE just felt it was one of those things that happens and there wasn't a whole lot that we could do about it. The people that were involved with it, in that stage there was no point in feeling sorry.

RS: You mentioned the Red Cross gave you some assistance?

MB: You see my family wasn't there. We didn't need any clothing, housing, this type of thing. But they did give us some cleaning materials. We had lost our tables, the tables that we had lost so they gave us a table and chairs, so that when we came home they were there. They also gave us mattresses for the boy's bunk beds downstairs.

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RS: You mentioned it changed your attitude.

MB: Well, prior to this, in the military sometime I suppose you hear thing and thing aren't really so. I had understood that the Red Cross during the Second World War sometimes had charged for their services and had taken contributions with the idea that they were helping people out and in that effect had been. But I investigated after they had been here to find out. It was interesting that the Red Cross actually in the Second World War had charged Europe because the British Red Cross had charged and since we were allies, they couldn't give it away while the British Red Cross was charging for it, so the result was they both charged for it, which I guess was the only think that they could do. I think the Red Cross is a pretty good organization. Now, I think probably they will have a drive this spring and I felt that I should give contribution.

RS: Did you have any dealing with the state officials? Highway patrol or anyone from the Governor's office?

MB: We had the highway patrol in terms of the road block, but that's the only time and they had very little difficulty there. They let us through easy every time we came through.

RS: How about the local officials, did they provide any services for you?

MB: Well, I think sure they would have. The police were there protecting and the city government was there helping out. The water was in two weeks after the flood. I don't know if it would be a state or country organization, the appraisers that came around and helped with the appraising property. Gail Loynd and some of those people they gathered all the trash up as we put it out, gee that was good. You didn't even have to worry, it was out there and they came and loaded it up, it was gone and then we could stack it up some more.

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

MB: Well, I think the greatest uplift was, we had a meeting where President Kimball spoke. Everybody was to that. It probably lifted everybody more than anything else idd. We had just choice experiences with people who helped out, and helping other people. I think that the choicest experiences came afterward in listening to the experiences that people had, and finding out how they did, that was as much as anything.

RS: You mentioned that you receive some assistance from these volunteers; did you receive any help from the Later-day Saints?

MB: No, you mean when it comes to clothing?

RS: Clothing or anything like use of the Bishop's storehouse.

MB: No, we didn't have any need for that.

RS: Do you feel that those who assisted in the recovery operation might have taken advantage of either you or the government?

MB: The ones that helped us I'm sure that they didn't because none of those received anything for it that was all volunteer. I've heard stories, but stories are stories.

RS: Without divulging names, are you aware of anyone that filed fraudulent claims?

MB: No, I don't know of anyone filed fraudulent, but I've heard of one, that I know of that got a pretty good deal.

RS: Did you have any difficulties in filling out your BOR?

MB: No, I didn't have any difficulties with it. I had no difficulties with them. They came down, the appraisers, the evaluator came down and looked at what I had. The only item that they cut was something that I should have left out in the first place. We had claimed loss or rental, and I put into it or I didn't take out of it which ever way you want to look at it, utility bill, and they deleted that. That's all I lost out of it.

RS: So you found it relatively easy to put values on things that you lost.

MB: Well, that part wasn't very easy. We found that we felt at least as we were preparing our claim that we wanted to be fair about it, so I suppose we were over conservative in a sense. The evaluator told us that never once had he had anybody's claim that came in below what the appraisers of the county had given it, that's how this was. But it's difficult to put a value on something that's old in terms of something that's new. But we felt good about it.

RS: Did you feel that the flood was some type of divine punishment or that it was a natural disaster or just a man-made disaster?

MB: Oh, I felt it was one of those things that happens, you have no control over it. I don't think there's any divine punishment for anything that was done particularly. I think it as a great test for people and it's one of those kinds of things that when you are here on this earth that you can expect to have, I don't think He told us that it was going to be a bed of roses all the time. And it's one of those things, well I'm not sure that it was something that was planned you know to punish us all. But I think it would definitely help in the area, might help them want to do better.

RS: Did you see any kind of divine intervention in any way in the flood?

MB: well, I think so, probably the fact that there was a minimum of lives lost, and it came at the time that it did, would indicate that some kind of protection was there because it certainly could have been worse if it would have a different time.

RS: Do you think that the dam should be rebuilt?

MB: I feel that it would be helpful if it were rebuilt. I think they will have difficulty in rebuilding it because of all the resistance against the building of it, but I think that it should be rebuilt.

RS: Do you think this is a common problem of the community?

MB: I have no way of measuring the commonness of it, but I think that there's a lot of people that feel that it should be rebuilt.

RS: I wouldn't worry you at all if the Teton River was back up there in the canyon?

MB: Course, I would probably build up on a hill, behind the dam.

RS: How has the dam disaster affected your life?

MB: Well, I think in terms of our family, it's brought our family closer together, because after we did get home, we had to work to rebuild. I think it helped a lot there. In terms of the kids, they had never had anything really bad happen to them, boy and it kind of brought to reality that there are things that do happen, that it doesn't always happen to the guy down the street, but it can happen to you. The children still talk about it, it was different.

RS: Now you brought your family back to Rexburg when?

MB: In August, the time that school started.

RS: What were you expecting?

MB: I'm not sure they knew what they were expecting, really. I had told them what it was like, but when we walked into the house, they all gaped and said, "Gee, I couldn't be like this." You know like I mentioned, Hettie cried, so I don't really think they knew, if they even had a mental picture.

RS: Had the area changed much from when you left your short two weeks of cleanup?

MB: Almost Rexburg it, in that two month time, they had cleaned up. It was almost cleaned up in terms of mud. There were a lot of houses that were destroyed, we drove out through Wilford after we got home, and it was still devastated out there. There was nothing out there. But in Rexburg, it was pretty well cleaned up at that time that was near the end of August that was three months after the flood.

RS: Were you impressed with the changes that had taken place that three months?

MB: Yes.

RS: You hadn't anticipated that?

MB: I didn't think that they would ever get that cleaned up to be honest with you. But I understand that a lot of it came about because they had so many people that would come up and help from Utah and Southern Idaho.

RS: Now when you took your wife and children into the home, you mentioned your wife wept. What was the kids' reaction?

MB: Oh, they ran over the house trying to see what was left. They wanted to find out what things they had and what they didn't have. They looked for their baseball gloves and baseballs and then they looked at the bicycles first. It was amazing that the bicycles had gone through the flood but they chained them together. And they are still working, it's been over a year and there hasn't been anything happen to them, they are still as good as they were.

RS: Had there been any further damage to your home?

MB: No, there was a couple of cracks in the foundation but nothing serious.

RS: A year has passed since the flood, are you still noticing the changes in your life?

MB: I suppose that there are some changes in my life because of the flood. It's hard to put your finger on things just because of the flood. I think there were some permanent changes of attitude. Things you didn't do before in your family you are still doing them. For example, I think that it has affected the family enough that in their prayers, they still remember the things that took place and ask for protection for things like that. So it has had a permanent effect on them at least to that extent.

RS: How had the community changed in your opinion?

MB: Oh, I think it's much better. I suppose the first thing that happened was the flushing away of the old buildings that were rundown and should have been torn down a long time ago. But I think that there's a pride in the city. We've always had a pride before, but I think it's better now. I think that there is unity here now, not as great as it was at the time of the flood, in fact some of that is deteriorating quite rapidly. I felt that it's a benefit to the community.

RS: Do you think that the community would be exhibiting the same attitude had the government not taken the liability and the responsibility for the flood?

MB: I don't know, if the government hadn't, the city would never recovered like it had, I don't believe. I'm sure the individuals would have rebuilt and on an individual basis they would have come out of it, but to have the whole community, and the whole area recover and that, I don't think that they would have made it. I think it would probably have been a lot like South Dakota was after the flood. They're just now recovering from it.

RS: What does the future hold, will we still feel the repercussions of the flood say two or three or five or ten years down the road?

MB: I would suspect in some ways that you would. One of the effects of the flood is to create an artificial raise in property value, and I suspect that for quite a while that will be felt. And even if the prices do taper off, or drop off, then even more it will be felt because those had to pay those high prices. I don't know that there are any permanent effects because of the new structures in the new building and all of the new businesses that are coming to Rexburg because of the flood.

RS: Well, thank you very much, Max. This tape will be placed in the libraries of Ricks college, Utah State University and Idaho State Archives, where it will be used by future researchers.