

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Nile Leroy Boyle – Life during the Teton Flood

By Nile Leroy Boyle

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Box 5 Folder 22

Oral Interview conducted by Mary Ann Beck

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

MB: Mr. Boyle, would you spell your name?

NB: Nile Leroy Boyle.

MB: Where were you born?

NB: I was born in Victor, Idaho.

MB: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

NB: I've lived in Rexburg a little over eleven years.

MB: How old are you?

NB: I'm 42.

MB: Do you have a family?

NB: Yes.

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

NB: Seven.

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

NB: 611 West Main, Rexburg, Idaho.

MB: What is your present address?

NB: The same.

MB: What do you do for a living?

NB: I'm a pharmacist.

MB: How long have you lived in this area?

NB: Almost all my life in this area.

MB: Did you own your own home?

NB: Yes.

MB: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?

NB: I supported the construction of the Teton Dam.

MB: Why?

NB: I felt it was needed for water and flood control. I felt it would be a good thing for the area to have the Teton Dam built.

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

NB: No.

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

NB: Most of our family were here at home. I was down at work.

MB: Did you notice anything unusual at work?

NB: No, not until the announcement came over the radio that the Teton Dam had broken.

MB: How was it then?

NB: Everybody was up in arms because they didn't know what to expect. The word we got was that there would be maybe a foot of water on Main Street. We had no prior word that the dam break was going to be so severe.

MB: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed? Did you try to save any household or personal belongings?

NB: The first I heard it was broken was when my daughter came to work and said, "The dam has broken." I told her there was no way that dam could break. I wouldn't believe it until I turned the radio on and listened; this was before noon. We spent the next couple of hours down at the drugstore moving things up on high shelves or moving them up out of the basement because we thought we'd get a little water. We didn't dream it was going to be anything like it was. In fact, we put plastic around the front of the store which was like putting your finger in the dike. It did not do good at all and we wasted a lot of time there because we tried to save things that the water ruined anyway.

MB: Did you see the floodwaters coming?

NB: Immediately we went up on the hill and even then they still were expecting a foot or two of water on Main Street. On the hill, I could see the water coming down by the drive-in and I could see how severe it was. I decided to come back to my house and turn the electricity off and move a few things. I hadn't been home at all. My wife wanted to come so my wife, Moana, and my baby, Marci, who was then about six months old, came back to the house with me to move some personal belongings. We moved some things

out of the basement. I was sure that we could leave to the west as soon as the flood started coming and then get away. We stayed just a couple of minutes too long. The water wasn't at the house, but when we went to the west it had already gone past the golf course, down the canal, across the highway and we were blocked out. We turned around and just barely missed the water. We missed getting out at Fifth West because the water had already come down Fifth West. The only alternative we had was to come back to the house. We went up on the sun deck with two other men that were trapped in this area, Larry Burns and Owen Johnson. We spent the whole day on top of our roof on the sun deck watching the flood.

MB: How high was the water?

NB: Around our house it was about a half inch from the top of our fence which is about 4 1/2 feet high.

MB: Did you see any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

NB: We saw a lot of unusual ones during the first couple of hours of the flood. I stayed in the house while those people on the roof watched the houses float away out of the Ricks-Wade Addition. One house after another floated off their foundations and out onto the golf course or down across the street. Our neighbor's house, Mrs. Thompson's, floated away. I was in the house and I could see how deep the water was on the windows and I knew exactly how deep the water was going to be if the windows ever broke in the house. I moved the TV and furniture upstairs. Luckily, even though logs and animals were floating by, nothing hit the windows and they held. We didn't get any water in the house except the water seeped under the door. That was quite substantial; it ruined the carpets, but inside the house that was the only damage we had done.

During this time, I spent a lot of time moving furniture and I was too busy to be afraid or worried about it. After about a half hour, my wife came down with the baby and she was really worried. She had seen all those houses float away and she was sure that ours was going to float away next and she was worried about the baby. She asked me if we could take a minute and have a word of prayer; which we did. We all felt better and the rest of the time we sat on the roof watching the flood as it came through. We saw debris, animals and our Buick Station Wagon float away. Larry's pickup and Owen Johnson's car floated away. Our neighbor's car, from up the street, floated down and hit the edge of our house and landed on the sidewalk and stayed there the rest of the time. There was quite a bit of excitement during that time.

MB: Did you see very many animals trying to escape the floodwaters?

NB: Yes, there were a lot of animals that came down in the current and they couldn't swim against it. They couldn't swim with the current either. As they would swim, it was strong enough to force them to keep going under. It would wash them under and then they would come up and try to swim some more and it would wash them under and I understand that an awful lot of them died.

We had one cow up the street at Don Rasmussen's house that got close to his house. The cow climbed upon the top step and the water was almost to the belly of the cow. The cow stayed there during the whole flood. It couldn't move without getting in the flood. She just stayed on that step and weathered the storm out there and that cow made it. There were an awful lot of animals that floated through. A lot of them were dead already when they got here and a lot more were trying to swim with the current, but they couldn't do it.

MB: Could you estimate about how many animals there were?

NB: We didn't count them.

MB: Where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood? Did you continue to stay there during the cleanup?

NB: Yes, we stayed upstairs in our own home. I'm sure we were the only people in this end of town that stayed in their home the night of the flood. Our house didn't have an awful lot of damage except the downstairs and we stayed in the upstairs bedrooms. That first night it was dark and it was real eerie. All night long there were cows that were bellowing that hadn't been milked. They were all over and all night long you could hear cows and animals. There were no lights or anything so it was quite a night. We were too excited or thinking too much to even sleep.

MB: How soon after the flood were you able to come downstairs?

NB: We came downstairs during the flood, off and on, and checked things. We tried to put things against the door to keep the water out. I imagine it was about 6:30 or quarter to seven the water receded. I could walk downtown and it was just over my knees. I walked down to the store to assess the damage. I was the first one, I'm sure, to go into Johnson Drug. The whole front of the building was out. There was little that was even salvageable. It looked like it had been beaten with an egg beater. As I walked into the store, I was walking towards the back in water about knee deep, I took one more step and ended up in water clear up to my neck. Luckily, I wasn't trapped there; I just came back up out of the basement and crawled over onto the floor. I took about ten more steps towards the back of the store and there was a dead cow and sheep laying side by side right where the pharmacy had been. The whole pharmacy was completely washed away. The floor had caved in where I had fallen in and much of the pharmacy equipment and merchandise had floated away or had fallen into the basement. It was completely full of water and a lot of the other merchandise, tables and stuff, probably floated out the front window and down the street. The rest of it was overturned and completely ruined.

MB: How long did it take you to clean the dead animals out of your store?

NB: We didn't get the animals out until the next day with the city's help, the city garbage crew. They came in with a cable and a chain and we hooked it onto those

animals and pulled them out. The city front loader came, picked them and hauled them away. We got rid of those on Sunday.

MB: When did you get the water pumped out of your basement?

NB: It was three or four days later. It was quite a while before we got to the basement of the drugstore. We tried to get down there to salvage things. We were looking for a money bag which was stuffed full of checks that had been in the pharmacy that we hadn't taken. We hadn't thought the water was going to be very severe and we hadn't even taken the money out of the cash registers. We had all of Friday's and Saturday's receipts in a bank money bag. We found it about ten days later in the basement and did salvage all those checks. Even though they had been wet they were all readable and were salvaged. Most of the other stuff was completely ruined.

NB: What was your first reaction when you viewed the destruction of the store?

NB: It's hard to say what my first reaction was. I knew that it was completely ruined and we didn't know whether anyone would be liable to pay for it. I thought the insurance would probably pay for it. A couple of days later we found out that the insurance wouldn't be liable for it. It was determined that the Bureau of Reclamation would be liable. We knew we had to rebuild everything because it was completely ruined. As far as anything that we cherished, I didn't have anything that I felt that badly about other than just the total destruction of the whole town and the store.

MB: In other words, you were out of a job?

NB: We were working in a trailer house. Within about three or four days we had the pharmacy running again so I never did lack for anything to do. We were busier than ever.

MB: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the floodwaters rolling through the area?

NB: It was complete bewilderment because I just couldn't believe the damage. Even the next couple of weeks, as I'd drive around town, I could see different areas and different people that were affected. It just couldn't help but bring tears to your eyes because so many of those people, especially the older ones, were completely wiped out. I felt badly, but you could rebuild. Some of those older people it was really hard on and the devastation was so complete and some people were completely wiped out. It was bewildering experience for all of us.

MB: did you have any relatives that got wiped out?

NB: No, I have one brother here, but he lives up on the hill. He wasn't affected at all although his office was, but no other relatives.

MB: How long did you go about cleaning up your property?

NB: We spent days and days at the drugstore and at home. At home we had to rip all the carpets out. The back garage and back yard were a complete mess. We had to scrape mud and haul mud. We hauled out the freezer that was back there and all the carpeting. Down to the store, we rented a little Bobcat front end loader and wheeled it out the door and tried to salvage what we could. We finally got a fire hose in the bank end of the store and the part that we salvaged we hosed it down and cleaned it up. We ran the pharmacy out of there for several weeks while we were rebuilding the front end of the store.

MB: What were some of the problems you were confronted with? What gave you the most frustration?

NB: The most frustrating thing was trying to determine really what you should do. For instance, the front end of the store looked completely unsafe and the floor was gone. You had to have money to do it, but we had a hard time determining whether we should tear it down or keep it. We had it inspected and their recommendation was to tear it down. We went ahead and tore it down. Even if we had shored up the foundations and tried to maintain it, the bid to do it was almost the same as the bid of rebuilding it. It was kind of frustrating to go through the Small Business Administration to get loans, but it was all done over a period of time and we survived.

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

NB: Yes, we received a lot of help from different people. Every morning wards would come in and the bishop would allocate some of the volunteers that came to our house and helped us. We had some relatives; my wife's sister and brother-in-law from Utah; my wife's uncle from Salt Lake City and their family; my brother from Victor and his family; as well as all the volunteers that came through the church system. It would have been a monumental task to do it without all the help that we had.

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

NB: The fact that so many people came in was uplifting to the community. They did a lot of good, not only the work they did, but they brought in hope and raised the spirits of the people. It seemed discouraging to work on something all week and at the end of the week come in and look at it and wonder what you had accomplished. It still looked bad. The volunteers raised the spirits of the people.

MBN: Did you or the store suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

NB: Yes, at the store we did suffer some. There wasn't too much vandalism, but at the outset we had some salvage companies that tried to help us. One was a group from Seattle. They took everything they wanted. We were expecting about ten to twelve thousand dollars worth of salvage from them. It turned out we didn't get a dime. The Idaho Attorney General's office investigated it. They made a trip to Seattle and this

fellow was already on probation from a previous prison experience. We didn't receive a dime from any of that; it was a complete loss. They took everything and promised to send fifty percent of the money back, but we never did get anything.

MB: Will you ever?

NB: I'm sure we won't. Last time we investigated this fellow was before a hearing for parole violation. It looked like he was going to end up back in prison.

MB: What steps could the State of Idaho taken in preventing things like that?

NB: They took a lot of steps and they were real cooperative in trying to help us. They even sent a man clear to Seattle to investigate, but these people come in and you have no way of checking; no telephones or anything. I think it's a problem after every disaster and it's one that they should get some system to work, but it's a rough problem.

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

NB: We had the Red Cross. The first thing we got was the SBA loan. That got us enough money to get started again. As far as straight aid, we didn't receive any except indirectly from the FDAA. They gave to the cities and cleanup help. If you called for anything to be hauled away or needed any special help at the store, the local government agencies were more than willing to come and help you. They did whatever they could and we had a lot of aid that way. As far as money aid, we got the SBA loan and didn't use any other form of government aid.

MB: Did you receive any assistance indirectly through the LDS Church through the volunteers that came. We got some brushes, wheelbarrows, and shovels from the Red Cross. We lived at home so we didn't need any assistance with food. It was there if we needed it, however.

MB: How did you cook during the three days the electricity was off?

NB: The electricity was only off in our house for 24 hours. It came on close to 24 hours that we didn't have to reset our clocks. It went off at about 2:59 on the day of the flood and it came back on Sunday at about 2:59. We were only without power for one day.

MB: How long did it take the flood to go past your home?

NB: After about 3 ½ -4 hours it was almost gone.

MB: What government agency did you deal with during the recovery operation?

NB: We dealt with a lot of them; the local government, FDAA, but mainly we dealt with the SBA.

MB: How was their effectiveness?

NB: They were very effective. Sometimes the red tapes seemed rather voluminous and almost foolish. We had so much we needed and I couldn't figure out why they were quite so fussy when they knew they were going to get paid right back from the Bureau of Reclamation. It was quite expensive bookkeeping wise to qualify for that SBA loan. I thought it should have been easier in a case like this especially when they knew they were going to get paid back immediately.

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

NB: Not directly. When we left town, they would check to see that you were a resident of the city, but I had no problem. I think they did a good job.

MB: Did you feel that any who assisted in recovery operations took advantage of you or the government, especially in getting a lot of money without really earning it?

NB: The salvage company definitely took advantage of us and probably, indirectly, the government. If we would have got some of that money back, our claim wouldn't been quite so large. We had good bids and we had a good contractor at the store. I think everything was pretty fair there. Some other people have had other experiences along this line where they have been taken advantage of.

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

NB: Not really. I know of some people I feel took advantage of it a little bit. They are the ones that are still complaining about it. From the reports, they got more than it was worth before. Most of the people I felt, were fair and the ones that were fair treated fairly by the Bureau of Reclamation.

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

NB: I think it was just a man-made disaster. The dam wasn't built quite the way it should have been so it broke.

MB: Do you feel that the dam should be rebuilt? If so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?

NB: I think it possibly should be rebuilt after a good study and if the cost benefit ratio was satisfactory. I would have to leave it up to the experts as to whether it should be built in the same place. It looks like with all the tunnels and everything still it might be as good a place as anywhere to keep it where it was. I doubt it will be built for many years.

MB: How has the Teton disaster changed your life?

NB: I think we're about back to normal. It has given me a change towards insight into things. You see how important your family is. Your first concern wasn't for the property damage; it was just to be thankful that your family and friends survived. We learned a lot of lessons and I hope we won't forget them from the dam breakage. We learned that things that were important to us when the chips were down were things that we should be working on to make our lives more meaningful.

MB: How did HUD treat you?

NB: I never did have any direct dealings with HUD. We were in our house and we didn't have to deal with HUD at all.

MB: They didn't help the store any?

NB: No, they didn't have anything to do with the store either.

MB: How did the Bureau of Reclamation treat you?

NB: I thought the BOR really went out of their way and tried to be fair. We had some minor things they questioned and we went back over them, but I thought they were reasonable and fair. I have no complaints at all with the way the BOR handled claims that we filed.

MB: What did you think about the Appreciation Day you had?

NB: I thought the Appreciation Day was great to show the people that we appreciated all of the help they gave us. Like I said earlier, it was a monumental task to clean up and it would have been much harder to do it without all the help that came in. I think the Appreciation Day was good for the first year. I wouldn't be in favor of having it again, but I think it was a meaningful expression of our appreciation to the volunteers that came in.

MB: Did a lot of them come in last Saturday and say, "Hi"?

NB: We didn't have any that worked on our place per se, but we took advantage of things at the park and up to the college. There were a lot of people there and the ones we talked to were happy to come back and see the changes that had been made. I think it was a good experience for those people that came back also.

MB: How many volunteers came back on Appreciation Day?

NB: I don't know. My brother was running one of those bus tours and they thought they had about two loads per bus and he ended up with about six. He said, "All the people on

the buses were from out of town.” I would imagine that through the day we had around four or five thousand people come through to view the dam.

MB: Did the store stay open?

NB: Yes, we stayed open.

MB: Were there a lot people that came in?

NB: No, it was a quiet day in the store. All the people were at the celebration, but business was probably slower than usual.

MB: Thank you, Mr. Boyle.