

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

**Roxanne Lorie Carlson – Life  
during the Teton Flood**

By Roxanne Lorie Carlson

June 24, 1977

**Box 5 Folder 30**

Oral Interview conducted by Ann Hayes

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

AH: Roxanne, where were you living at the time of the flood?

RC: In Rexburg.

AH: Where in Rexburg?

RC: 32 South 3<sup>rd</sup> West.

AH: Did you own your home?

RC: No, we were living in the bottom level of a split level apartment building-four-plex.

AH: Do you have a family?

RC: Yes, two girls and myself.

AH: What were you doing at the time the news came over the radio that the dam had broken?

RC: My younger daughter and I decided to investigate the area that we were living in because we had only been in the Rexburg area for a year and this was our first summer here. We wanted to go see the Teton Mountains and the things that were up north. My older daughter, at the time, had spent the night with someone else and did not want to go with us. She stayed with her friends and Tony and I went for a ride. We were driving up Green Canyon and we had heard about it and we wanted to investigate it. We were in Tetonia and we were listening to the radio. We kept hearing reports about the dam, but we didn't know where the dam was. When we heard that the dam had finally burst, we decided we had better turn around and head for Rexburg. The only thing that we could think of is that we were looking at the Teton Mountains, we were in a town called Tetonia and the dam that had just burst was called the Teton Dam. We figured we'd better get out of there. We tore for home just as fast as we possibly could. When we got on down the road, we noticed that there were no cars around. We saw one highway patrolman that waved us on and told us to hurry. We noticed that there were cattle acting very strangely. They were running back and forth like from one fence to another. Tony was joking as we were driving down the road, "What would you do if a big wave came up over this next hill?" we were kind of laughing and I said, "Don't laugh." I became kind of frightened and kind of scared about it.

We passed through Sugar City and noticed there wasn't anybody around. As we got towards Rexburg, we came upon a big traffic jam and everybody was hollering at us to get to the top of the hill. The only thing I could think of was to get to my other daughter; so we went out from around the traffic jam and took off on a side street. We headed for the apartment building where my other daughter was. When we got over there, Tony ran up the stairs and banged on the door. There was no one there. We thought perhaps she'd gone over to our place. We drove home, but she wasn't there. We had our little dog with us, but we ran in and grabbed our coats and threw them in the car. We grabbed a quilt

and two blankets, my church books off the desk, my pictures of the girls off the TV set, and that's all we took. We did take a quart of water because somebody said it was going to be hot outside. I brought in four heads of lettuce that we had bought at a store on the way and I laid them on the table. I thought, "I should put them in the refrigerator, but they'll be okay. I'll put them away when this is all over. They'll be all right on the table."

We went up the Manwaring Center to check if we could see Chris anywhere up there but she wasn't there. I left Tony and the dog up there. She put him on a leash and she combed the campus to see if she could see Chris. I went back to the house and back over to the apartment building again to try to find her.

In the meantime, there was a man that lived across from us in the other basement apartment that was very hard of hearing. I went over and banged on the door and for some reason, he heard me. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have heard anybody. In fact, the week before he had locked both doors. His wife wanted in because she had left her key at home and she couldn't get in because she couldn't raise him. For some reason, after a short amount of knocking on the door, he came to the door and I told him to hurry up and leave because the dam had broken. He went out to the street and by the time I left he apartment he had already gotten a ride. The police drove by and told me that I had ten minutes to get to the hill right away. I picked up a girl who was running because everybody had left her and she didn't have a ride. There was no way she could make it up the Manwaring Center in ten minutes at the rate she was going. I had her jump in the car and took her up there.

We couldn't get back down and I paced the Manwaring Center over and over. Everybody was watching the water hit the town and I couldn't stand to watch because I knew my daughter was down there some place. I was so excited. I kept falling all over the place. I tripped on the stairs and fell down flat on my face and I tripped in a little gutter and fell and broke some bones in my foot. I was still scared to death because I couldn't find Chris and she was the type of girl that was always scared about things. She had a lot of fears about this sort of thing. I knew wherever she was, she'd be terrified. I had seen lots of her friends and asked them and they would say, "Well, we saw her at this time with somebody." This was all before the flood hit and they'd seen her downtown with different people. We could never pinpoint it. I finally got in the car and I noticed there were a lot of people going up towards the dry farms. I thought that maybe she was up there in a car with somebody; so we went up there. By that time the police and some of the National Guard were up there. They wouldn't let us back down. The water hadn't covered Rexburg yet, but it was in the process of happening so they wouldn't let us back down the hill. I was getting a little bit more hysterical by the minute. I was trying to keep it in on account of Tony. All I could think of was that I had to get to the Manwaring Center because that was where everybody was to check in so everybody could find their families. I knew that it wasn't doing me any good up here and they had all the roads blocked. Finally, Tony ran back and said, "My mother's got a broken foot and its getting worse. She just broke it, we've got to get down." They let us go back down the road. When we go to a certain point and couldn't go any further, this guy hollered at somebody

and told them that I had a broken leg. They had e pull over. We rolled our windows down partially. We took our dog and left the two cats in the car. They put me in a jeep and took me down to the health center there at the college. They wrapped it, gave me some medicine and some crutches. They put me back in the ambulance and took me up the Manwaring Center. They drove up to the main door of the Manwaring Center and dropped me off.

The rest of the time the car was left up there. Tony would go up about ever hour and throw some water on the cats to cool them off. The car was hot and we were afraid they were going to die in the car. It was about a mile up to the car and back and she'd go up about every hour and do this for the cats. She'd come back and check in with me. I kept going to the desk and have them page Chris Carlson. Finally, they put her on the missing persons list and the Red Cross went looking for her. I sat for twenty-four hours, off and on, by the door and watched every person that came in that door looking for her. We were up late that night. That night, we wintered up to one of the other buildings on campus where they had a short wave radio station set-up. I got up the stairs because I wanted to get hold of my parents to let them know we were okay. If by chance Chris couldn't find us, she might contact them. There was no way I could get an answer; I just had to send a message. Some people helped me back down the steps. I was still excited and I slipped on the crutches and knocked myself out on the fender of a car. The Red Cross had a room set aside for us in one of the boy's dorms. They finally talked me into going over there an letting them see what they could find out about Chris. They worked until two or three in the morning trying to find her for me. I finally went up and got the car and brought it down. The cats survived it.

When we could get down into town the next day, we started looking for Chris. We went over to our apartment. There wasn't water on the streets or anything, but the water was till in our apartment and we couldn't open the door. Tony looked in, but I couldn't bring myself to because I was afraid of what I might see in there. I was afraid that maybe Chris had gotten caught in there and I couldn't stand to look. We went over to the other apartment building where Chris had been. Logs from the lumber mill, that had broken loose, were over there. This was at the Twin Pines Apartments. There were logs; I'd never seen anything so big, piled up against those buildings. In order to get to the building Tony had to crawl probably six feet up. People had been assuring us that if they had stayed in the apartments, on the third floor, they would be all right. The helicopters had flown over and said that the apartment building was still standing. They didn't know if they were gong to cave in because they didn't know how much damage was done. One minute they were building me up and the next minute I was terrified all over again.

The night I was in the dorm, I tried to get some rest and I prayed and prayed; harder than I have ever prayed in my whole life. I kept imagining things. I could see Chris' body floating up against some trees covered with mud. Really horrible pictures came to my mind, especially if you are somebody like me who can conjure up some really horrible things. I could see Chris laying there in all sorts of positions. I thought, "Well, she's probably okay. We've never had any really bad luck before." In the back of my mind I keep thinking she's stranded somewhere on a hill by herself. If we did find her, what

kind of frame of mind is she going to be in out there alone in the dark. She was terrified of the dark. I didn't know what we would find if we did find her alive.

In the meantime, the reports were coming in that there were probably 150 people dead. The whole combination of things was making it ten times worse than it was. When we got over to the apartment house, Tony started banging on the door and nobody answered. She started hollering and a lady came to the door. She said Chris was all right. She had taken my daughter, her daughter and her other children to Rigby and put them in a motel down there. We were so grateful and so thankful that we just stood there; Tony and I hung onto each other and bawled. We tried to get down to the motel because we had heard that Chris was pretty upset because she thought that Tony and I were both dead. She knew that we had gone out, but she didn't know what had happened to us. We were very low on gas and we went to see some friends of ours. They had a five gallon can of gas that they had for emergencies. They gave that to us, we poured it into our car and Tony and I left to go down to Rigby to find Chris. By the time we had found the gas, had it in the car and got down to Rigby, this lady had bone back, taken the kids and gone up to Teton over the dry farms through the back roads. I had no idea where they went. She went to see her ex-husband and took the kids up there because he had a house up there.

I was talking to the lady at the motel and she said this mother and a friend that she wanted to see in Rigby and wanted to be with during this time. She took the kids to the motel and left them there and left the older girl to baby-sit. My daughter was terrified, hysterical and this lady, I don't know her name, at the motel sat with Chris most of the night. She helped her call my folks in Montana to let them know she was okay, but that she couldn't find up. Chris cried and screamed all night. There was nobody to take care of her except this lady at the motel. She had begged this lady to let her go to the college up to the Manwaring Center, but this lady was frightened. Once she had a hold of Chris she didn't want to let her go incase something else happened. She kept Chris with her. We went to Rigby and we went back to Rexburg.

It was starting to get dark because it took so long to get back in because of the road blocks and it took a real long time to get back into Rexburg. I found one of Chris' friends and he told us that his folks had a farm up on the dry farms. He said, "You'll just have to comb every house until you find her." He took us back up over the old back roads until we found a way to get to Teton. All of the other roads were washed out; they just weren't there. We got to Teton and we started looking. All we had was the second name of this lady. We didn't have the name of her ex-husband in Teton so we were having a terrible time. It took us about an hour and a half. When we finally pulled in this one driveway, it was a trailer house; Chris just came tearing out of this house like she was shot out of a gun. She grabbed hold of us and wouldn't let go.

We drove back to Rexburg. Tony said, "Boy am I glad that's over with! Now I can see some of my friends and have a good time." It was kind of a lark for these younger kids. All of their friends were up to the college, there were free meals and they started showing movies. Parents kind of relaxed a bit because they knew that their children couldn't go anywhere and they were safe. It was a safe, secure feeling to know that the National

Guard and police were there. You felt protected and safe. They gave us another room and I took one room and let the girls have the other room together.

The next day, we went out and started checking on some of our other friends. We went down to our place. Our neighbors had gotten us a pump and started pumping the water out. I tried to take my crutches and go down in the muck and mud which was about hip deep. They were telling us all sorts of stories. They wouldn't let me go down in the apartment. I had to sneak down when somebody's back was turned. They said, "Don't go down there; don't open any cupboards or anything if they're closed; there might be snakes." This was a fear that we had. They said, "Don't go down there; don't open any cupboards or anything if they're closed; there might be snakes." This was a fear that we had. They said, "Don't go down there because you don't know what you are going to find." These friends of mind, who lived upstairs, were very concerned that I would go down and find something dead or I would go down and open up a cupboard and there would be a rattler. This was something that they kept warning us about. They warned us about the snakes that had been washed down. However, we didn't run into anything like that.

We couldn't believe the destruction when the water was pumped out. All of our doors were closed when we left. All of our cupboard doors and all of our closet doors were literally torn off the hinges and thrown every which way. There were no logs in our place. There was a hold, probably from the pressure of the water swirling around that went all the way from our living room, through a closet and through the girl's bedroom. You could look from the living room through this great big hole. It had torn the walls right out. It tore the walls out in the bathrooms. We had a TV set in our living room. It took two people to move; it was so heavy. That TV was tossed around like a little toy box and was completely turned upside down and on its side on the counter in the kitchen. We had a hundred boxes of things that we had stored in our garage, plus carpeting. They were things we couldn't use in this apartment. We had the cleanest garage in the neighborhood. There wasn't a thing left in there. What hadn't gone out from underneath the garage door floated down into the house. It took us three days just on that.

We weren't able to save anything. We ended up with five pieces of my set of china. We tried to save two portable TV sets, but that didn't work. There just wasn't anything we could save because everything was either broken or torn. What clothes we got out and had sent to be cleaned and washed, when we got them back they'd fall apart if you touched them. They had great big holes all over them. It was almost as if there was some sort of acid or something in the water. They went to pick up the stereo that was built well and when they picked it up it collapsed all over. They said there was a bacteria in the mud from all the dead animals that caused this. I think that some of the chemicals that were missing might have been the reason for this also. We found a couple of albums and took them and rinsed them off. We took all the pictures out of there and spent about three hours that night, in the sinks at the college, washing pictures. Any place where the mud hit the color was completely gone. If it had just been wet, we could of dried them off and scattered them all over the floor so that they would dry. They curled and everything, but we were able to save some of our pictures. I had hundreds of books that I

had been collecting for the last twenty years. There wasn't any of those that we could save. If you were able to get it out, it fell apart in your hand. The Red Cross came by and told us that they had some clothing. They told us not to save anything at all. They really advised people against even saving their furniture because they said as time goes on these maggots get inside the wood and it would be ruined. Everything was sort of hauled out and we weren't able to save anything.

I was really glad that we didn't have any real property at the time. It was almost a blessing if your house was swept away. You had no idea where it was and the only things that were left standing were your foundations. We felt that we had it bad, but I never once felt sorry for myself. I saw there were so many other people that had it so much worse. I guess I felt the sorriest for the older people. There was a little lady that lived next door to us who was a very good friend. She was here from Russia. She'd been over here since she was just a young girl. She had spent all her married life in the Burton area and brought up her children in the Rexburg area. In her house she had memories of her children. This lady is maybe 75 or 80 years old and had a number of things from Russia from when she and her parents had lived in South America. Things that can never be replaced. The sad part is she can't go back and start over again at 80 years of age. I'm young, I can start over again. I miss the things my kids made when they were little; I'll always miss that. It's something you can't replace, but I was thankful that they had their animals, their pets. The things we lost were only the material things that we can always build again. We've still got our whole life ahead of us, but boy older people, they don't have anything. We were always so afraid that maybe Molly might become so depressed that she might give up. She's a little fighter and she came back and moved right back in there when they were finished. She's back there just as spry and spunky as ever. I'm glad she had the strength to recover from it like she did.

AH: After you found your daughter what were the first real problems you were confronted with?

RC: I don't know. I sometimes think had a screw loose someplace. Although I knew we had lost, probably everything, I just didn't feel like there were any problems. I didn't feel like I had any problems. I knew that my kids were safe; my parents knew everybody was okay; we had our two cats, and to me that was the most important thing. The college was so great. We had good meals, nourishing meals. The kids had entertainment. There was a strict curfew put on. You knew that your kids were safe and sound. You could relax and kind of listen to the reports and try to map out what your next move was going to be.

As far as problems are concerned, I guess the only problem we really had was against the people we had been renting from. We wanted to get back into our apartment because we really loved it. HUD told us that they would pay for a year of our rent into this apartment. We got everything straightened up and talked to the people who owned the apartments and everything seemed to be okay. When we went to set up the deal about the lease, they told us our apartment had been already rented from under us. They said, "You had been planning on moving so we just went ahead and promised the apartments to somebody else." When we went back to HUD, HUD said this was one of the reasons

they had sent us out to set up the deal. Even though the apartments weren't finished and wouldn't be finished for some three or four months, they wanted us to get a commitment because they had found that many landlords were doing this same thing in hopes of raising the rent. I am glad we didn't go back in there now because our friends who still live on the upper level now manage these apartments. They are disgusted because they were not properly cleaned up. When they started hanging sheet rock, there was till contaminated mud on the 2x4's. They had to dig up the yard because of big cracks in the floors and water leaks ruining the carpeting and the appliances. Cupboards and things like that were put in, but a lot cheaper. These apartments were really exclusive apartments. In fact, before the flood they were the best apartments in Rexburg. They were built well and everything in them had nothing but the finest. When they rebuilt they raised the rent and put in cheaper things. They not only did that for us, but they did that to some of the other people too. They said that the only ones they were going to have in there were older, retired people. At the rate of rent that they were now asking it was going to be an impossibility for a lot of people to pay rent there. They're having a hard time keeping them rented because of this. I got mad and was very hurt because we had lived there for a year. When we wanted to move back in with a promise of all of our rent paid for a year, they turned around and wouldn't do it for us. They liked the idea that they could get more rent. That was the only problem we really ran into.

At first we didn't want to live in a trailer. We wanted to find a place and there just wasn't any places because everybody grabbed quickly in order to get them. We were lucky as we got one of the better trailers. We haven't been that happy with it, but we got one of the trailers. We haven't been that happy with it, but we did get one of the better trailers. We haven't been that happy with it, but we did get one of the better trailers. There were a lot of people who got some pretty shabby ones, but the idea was that there was so much help and there were so many people doing things for us that you didn't feel like you were really getting hurt. We had a warm clean place to live, we had nourishing meals, we had people helping us, trying to salvage things, and we had the knowledge of knowing that we were safe. The flood hit and took some lives and destroyed a lot of property yet on the whole, you were safe and sound. Everything seemed to go along pretty smooth for us after the first initial part when we realized we weren't going to be able to get back into our apartment. We accepted the fact that we were going to have to move into a trailer.

AH: How long did you stay at the college before you moved into your trailer?

RC: We were at the college until the end of July. Since we didn't have to pay rent or utilities I felt we needed to get away for awhile. My relief society president kept encouraging us to go on a vacation. I felt kind of bad about leaving, but she kept pushing us into this because she felt we needed to go. We moved out of the dorm and went to see my parents in Montana. From there we got this and we'd all pile in one car and go to California and see my brother. We were gone from the last week in July until about the third week in August. They had moved our trailer in about two weeks prior to when we got back. We weren't there to move right into it so they didn't bother to hook up the water or lights. When we came back to move in, there was nothing hooked up and we

were without electricity and water for about a week. It was warm and it was nice out. Some restaurants had opened up. JB's had opened as well as the Safeway Store. We were at the dorm from June 5<sup>th</sup> to approximately July 24<sup>th</sup>.

AH: What did you do about replacing your personal possessions that you had lost?

RC: We got a small loan from the SBA to get us over the hump. Red Cross gave us money to buy clothing and shoes and some other things that we needed. We were able to get some food from the bishop's storehouse that was set up on campus. With this small loan we were able to pick up some things. We're waiting to hear back on our claim. I don't know whether they're going to let us down or not. I hope not because we haven't put in as much as some people have because all we lost was our personal property. I've spent fifteen years building things up like my library that had hundreds of books in it. We're only asking about \$15,500. This takes care of all our personal property and clothing.

AH: How do you feel about the possibility of them rebuilding the dam?

RC: I think it would be the most idiotic thing that I have ever heard of in my life. Although we weren't here when a lot of the controversy was going on about the dam I could not believe, after seeing the dam and the size of it and realized just how much water it was supposed to hold back. It was only made of dirt. How anybody in his right mind could ever build a dam in that place. The only way that I can see them ever building another dam would be a concrete dam. It would be a lot more expensive, but I think it is the only way they're ever going to be safe. In this area there are earthquakes and small tremors constantly. They know that they're going to be due for a big one some day. You have to go and see where the dam was built; you have to see how those rocks are to realize that the people who were against the dam, in the first place, should have been listened to. If I've gotten the right information, there were even engineers who said that this is wrong. That you can't build a dam in that place. I never was so shocked at anything in my whole life when I realized that that little bitty dam was holding back that much water.

AH: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who turned in fraudulent flood claims?

RC: Yes, I know of a couple. The husband said, "All you do is if you had one pair of socks you write down you had five pair of socks; if you had three shirts, you write down you had eight." They did ask for quite a bit. They said that they probably only lost three thousand dollars worth of things. They got back from the government close to \$20,000. I would say that that sort of situation was minimum. A lot of people that I've talked to are like me. We wanted to write down what we paid for in the beginning, but the Bureau said, "Don't do that, you won't be able to replace it." You start shopping and start pricing and you say, "Well, our TV set, we paid approximately \$850.00 for it." I was going to write down \$850.00. I went down and priced them and the guy looked at me and he laughed. He said, "You wouldn't get that same set for that. It would cost you

about \$1,095.00 now.” I’m not going to buy a TV set that big again, but I did put the money into it and maybe I’ll buy two smaller TV sets.

It was the same thing with furniture and bedroom sets and things like that. Our living room set, we found out, was only about \$100 more or \$150 more than what we paid for it. Some things have gone down in price while most others have gone up. I had a beautiful set of china that my husband had bought me when we were first married. It was appraised at \$212 at that time. I went down to price the same set now and it’s \$449.95. It’s doubled in price since I got it. It gives you a funny feeling to put that down, but that’s the only way you can because the Bureau said you’ve got to be able to replace it. That’s what they wanted to do was to replace it. It gave me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, but what are you going to do. You don’t have any other choice.

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

RC: I don’t think it was a punishment. I think it was a man-made disaster and I think it was caused by man’s fault. I think a lot of people feel we were punished or something like that. I kind of go along with what the president of the church, the LDS Church, said. He said, “We learn by these things, but I definitely don’t feel that I would ever be a punishment because our God is not the type of person who punishes.” When you think of all the damage, the amount of area that it covered and realize that only eleven people died because of it, I know it wasn’t a punishment. I think it was a mistake on the side of man. It served to teach all of us. I think we all learned from it. I think we realized who well off we are now.

AH: Has the Teton Dam disaster made any drastic change in your life?

RC: I don’t know whether they’re drastic or not. I’ve become more aware of what’s important. I put a lot of value on things, monetary type things that had a lot of value to me. I wanted to buy big things, to have things fancy and nice, and now I just want to have things to be comfortable for us. I don’t care whether we really have that big TV set or that big fancy stereo. I’ve learned that the things that are important right now is the family. To make sure you make the most out of every day. We would put off things, not worry about it; we can always do it later. Now I realize we might not always be able to do it later. That’s why I went on vacation. I may never get another chance to take my children to California. I may never have another chance to show my kids the ocean or Disneyland. I want to do what we can do now. I don’t know if that makes sense to anybody but this is the way I look at it. I look at the things that are important, our happiness and what we can make out of our lives. I don’t look at whether we can buy fancy or what we can buy to show off. I always wanted a big fancy house and lots of fancy furniture and a big fancy car. But that is not important. What’s really important is how you and your family feel about each other. I wasn’t happy with all that stuff. I enjoyed it to a degree, but there were a lot of headaches with it, a lot more bills to pay, a lot more areas where we were short of cash because of buying those fancy things. It’s not that we’d be satisfied living in an old cabin either.

We're going to buy a HUD trailer and we have a place to put it and we know that we can fix it up to be a nice home. There have been a lot of people that are going to help us get all settled in. We never thought we'd leave the Rexburg area, but we're going to now. Your values kind of change. All of a sudden you realize what's important and what's not important. Being comfortable and enjoying every minute with your kids, every single day with them, is more important than being around fancy objects. When you are around those people that you love and are really enjoying that love and sharing that love, that's the most important thing. When you almost lose it, that's what it takes for us to realize that we take some things for granted. We realize that we've got to make do the best we can now, because tomorrow might be too late. We might not have another chance tomorrow. I feel that I have to do what I can with my kids because we are a small family and there are just the three of us. We have to do for ourselves right now. I think we have to be very active in our church and build our life around our religion and our family. Let the chips fall where they may as far as the rest is concerned and I know that it will all be okay.

AH: Thank you, Roxanne.