

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Verl Bird – Life during the Teton Flood

By Verl Bird

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Box 5 Folder 19

Oral Interview conducted by Richard Stallings

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin—April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Richard Stallings: Mr. Bird, would you please spell your full name?

Verl Bird: Verl Bird.

RS: Where were you born?

VB: Teton City, Idaho.

RS: How long have you lived in Sugar City?

VB: Sixteen years.

RS: Do you have a family?

VB: Yes.

RS: How many children do you have?

VB: Three children ranging from five to eleven years old.

RS: What is your address?

VB: Sugar City.

RS: Are you living in the same home that you were living in prior to the flood?

VB: Yes.

RS: What do you do for a living?

VB: At the time of the flood I was a mechanic, but I sold the shop in Rexburg and am now farming.

RS: Are you presently involved in farming only?

VB: Yes.

RS: Several years ago when they started making plans for the Teton Dam, there was a certain amount of controversy over the issue. Were you aware of this controversy?

VB: Yes.

RS: Do you have a position on this issue?

VB: I thought the building of the dam was a great idea. Not only for stopping the spring runoff on the river, but as far as irrigation was concerned, I thought that I was a

great idea. In the spring of 1962 the water backed up on the Teton River so bad and it flooded. It came within a block away from the house. The north side of Sugar City got a lot of water, but nothing like the Teton Dam flood. They were getting a lot of irrigation from the dam.

RS: Did you or any member of your family have any premonition of the Teton Disaster?

VB: I don't think so.

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

VB: Here at our home.

RS: Do you remember what you were doing?

VB: We were building on our motor home. The family and my father-in-law were here. Leon Baron from Ammon was helping build a motor home. Our neighbor came running over and said, "The dam has broken. You had better get out." We said, "No, go back home. The dam hasn't broken. There is no problem." We kept building with no concern at all. I needed more panel nails to finish our project, so at 12 o'clock I jumped on my motorcycle and went to Rexburg to the Boise Cascade store. They were all in a panic and the lights were turned off. He didn't say so I flipped him a quarter and jumped on my motorcycle and left.

I got back to the river bridge and they had a roadblock up. I realized that it was real. I motored that it was real. I motored up between them all. I knew the policeman, Brent Barner. I pointed to him and up the street and said, "I'm going to Sugar City." I took off. He ran out to grab me and then he said, "Go ahead." I was the only one going north.

I came home and we gathered up a few things. I said, "We'll be back tonight or tomorrow." We loaded the things up, put water in the motor home and got the family together. They didn't take hardly anything, only a little bit of grub. I told them to go up on Rexburg Hill by Frank Daniel's street. They could look back down there with the binoculars. Leon and I decided that we would stay at the house.

In the flood of 1962, Leon stayed with this house and diked it up with plastic and stopped the water from getting into his house.

Two weeks before the flood, I had been up to the dam and there wasn't much water in there. I knew that it had been building up the last couple of weeks, but we figured there wasn't going to be that much water. We thought that a guy could at least wade in a couple of feet of water if he had to. We stayed. We had some big plastic and I covered my garage doors, nailed down some wood stripping and put dirt on the bottom.

We were standing at the west end of the garage, next to the street, talking about what we would do if we were caught out in the water if it looked like it was getting too deep. We decided that we would get on the slippery slide, which is the toughest thing that I had around here. It had a big steel pole mounted into the ground with cement. We thought it would stand if there should be a lot of water come all at once.

We were standing at the west end of the garage and Leon looked up and said, "Look, I can't believe it." I looked up to the north, one block away there it was. It was a solid mass of junk moving, standing up like a wall. In the intersection there was a car rolling over and over in front of the wall of water. Two feet in front it was bone dry. I yelled to Leon, "Mount the slide." He picked up the radio and pulled the garage door shut behind the plastic. He didn't lock it. He ran to the slippery slide and got on top, which is eleven feet high. I ran to the house.

I shut the porch door, picked up our cat, put it on the back porch on the window sill and ran through flower garden and jumped on the slide only ten feet ahead of the water. The water was at the alley. It came up through the alley, paused at the lilacs that we had next to the alley, paused at the lilacs that we had next to the alley. It pounded them down as if you pulled the cord. They all folded down as pretty as could be. I was still standing on the second step, two feet off the ground, and the water was six or seven feet high. I jumped on that slide, I'll tell you. While we were on the slide, there was all kind of clanging and clashing around. It looked quite bad. After a minute or two we collected a couple of roofs and other junk from the flood on the slippery slide. We had quite a head of water backed up behind that.

Close by our property there is a power line that feeds Sugar City. The power line started leaning over from all this garbage hitting against the lines. It pulled the line tight and one of the big forty lines broke and hit right at the bottom of the slide. It was still hot. That line was jumping on the water and popping like a whip. I yelled to Leon, "If these other lines come down on us, we won't be able to dodge them. They are still hot." I told him to get out in the water and hang on to the slide. If the power line hits the slide, the slide is grounded and we wouldn't get electrocuted. We weren't worried about the flood; it was the power line that worried us. I jumped in the water on the down current side from the garbage and it felt like ice. It was about up to my waist. Leon had started in when he said, "I think they went dead. They are not popping anymore." We climbed back on the slide again.

By this time we were wondering if the slide was going to stay put. All the garbage that had collected was putting a lot of pressure on it. I climbed down the slippery slide and tried to sweep the garage off from the bottom end of the slide. You couldn't do anything but dig the straw off. I went back up on the slide again and sat there and watched. We didn't seem to have any problems with the slide at all. I think that if a trailer house or a house had come along, we would have stood it with only a dent in the slide. The steel post on the slide is a twelve inch post.

We stood there and watched the trailer houses, the neighbor's house, and a lot of other houses go by, including my house for rent that we had across the street. It floated like a boat to the end of the power cables and kept going by. I said to Leon, "There goes \$8,000. Look at her go." It went down on the railroad tracks.

We stayed on the slide until about 8:00 that night. We walked around on the roof that had been stopped by the slide. We could have left the first thirty minutes after the flood hit. There were several helicopters going by. Several of them stopped, but we were all right and we waved them on. We figured that as long as we were there, we might as well see what was going on.

About 6:00 the water had gone down about halfway. I got off the slide and waded into the house and got on a dry pair of pants and hip boots. I looked through the house and set up a few plants that had tipped over. I got my camera, the worst one of all. The rest were sitting on the floor soaking up water. My movie camera and another expensive camera were sitting on the floor in all the water. I came out and took a lot of pictures. There was still a small current going by the neighbors and various other places. Leon was still out on the slide.

We sat there for a while and decided that our neighbor's two-story house had a dry bed on the second floor. We debated whether we should stay there or go to Rexburg. I was sure that the neighbors were concerned about what was going on. We knew that we were all right. We decided that we had better go into town.

When a helicopter flew by, I waved him down. He came in pretty close but we couldn't land. He pointed to the street, indicating that was where we were to get picked up, then he left. We jumped back into the water again and decided that if we were going to get a ride we would have to wade out. We waded over to the road. The helicopter came back and sat down on the water. We got into the copter and he took us to Rexburg.

RS: While you were up on the slide, what were you thinking about as you saw the water and debris floating by?

VB: WE were pretty concerned at first wondering if the slippery slide was going to stay. After awhile we knew that was a safe place for us to be. It was funny that we worried about material things. I couldn't care less now. As we watched all this stuff go by, even my own things, we placed no value on it. It was there and happening.

RS: You didn't see it as the end of the world?

VB: No. My wife says that I don't have a heart. Eventually you knew that the water was going to have to quit and dry up. You can't get bent over and all out of shape about it.

My house didn't have any structural damage whatsoever. A fridge on the back porch dented our metal siding a little. Water was inside the house. There was no structural

damage like the houses that washed away or broke in two pieces and lost one side. There were about five houses on the southwest end of Sugar City that had no damage.

It was like big rocks in a river. The first rocks spilt the stream; splitting the current and making water come out on both sides. We realized after awhile that this was on a large scale. We could see two big currents on both sides of Sugar City. This area was calm because all the houses on the end of town had spilt up the current for us. The water was considerably lower on this end of town than it was on the northern end of Sugar City, possibly as much as three or four feet lower. The people up on buildings watching the flood said that the waterline was twelve of fifteen feet deep. That was not the waterline. That was the waterline sitting in the lake.

The water was so muddy as it came down that you couldn't believe it. It just kept pushing on walls and buildings because it couldn't push them down.

RS: Did you see any livestock or animals?

VB: Many went by, in fact, we had a cow that got jammed in with our stuff on the slide. We tried to get her out but the water pressure was too strong. Her head was out of the water so we thought that she would make it. When the water went down, we got a pole and got her out. The cow seemed so grateful to be out of the water that she thought she ought to get up on the slide with us. We had a terrible time convincing her that she was a nice cow and could go about her business and leave. She finally left. By this time the cow was half floating and half walking on the ground. We saw a lot of dead horses and other animals go by. Some were still trying to make it without dying in the floodwaters.

RS: Several people have mentioned that a lot of dust preceded the wall of water; did you notice this at all?

VB: Yes. Two feet in head of the wall of water it was bone dry. The water stood straight up like a stone wall. The garbage in front of it was holding the water back and the water was shoving forward.

RS: Did you see some fairly heavy objects coming along to give you an idea of the current?

VB: Yes. Cars came by. The front wheels would still be on the ground. The gas tank being in the back of the car would float and hold the back of the car up. You could see the wheels all going backwards. We had some timber that landed against my garage that came off of the bridge on Highway 33, two miles away from our home.

RS: Did you hear any unusual noises?

VB: Yes. Both Leon and I commented on that. There was the sound of running water, but it didn't sound like a rushing river. The noise that really made us wonder came from the houses. It was ripping and tearing noises. It almost sounded like there were people in

the houses screaming and crying. The creaking and squeaking of the boards in the houses made these strange noises. There were no other sounds that we were used to such as cars on the highway.

RS: Did you expect to see people float by?

VB: We did for awhile because of these other noises that we heard. But we never saw any people floating by, only animals.

RS: Were you surprised afterwards of the little loss of lives?

VB: Yes. I was really surprised. I think that the count was only eleven. We thought there should have been more because of all that floated by us. They did a good job in getting people moved out before the waters hit.

RS: What damages did you suffer?

VB: There was no structural damage to the house itself other than the mud and water. We had some damage to the garage. The overhead door broke and the panel over the door and a little shed floated over against the garage and caused some damage there. Other than those few things, we got away fine.

RS: Was your rental completely lost?

VB: Yes. The rental house floated away and everything was destroyed.

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

VB: It was unusual and exciting when the hot power lines were coming down near us. An unusual experience that comes to mind right off was some time after the flood when we were cleaning up. My wife set out a big Bible that was wet. The pages were very thin and she opened the book and laid it out to dry. As each page dried it turned over, one page at a time, as if someone was standing there turning the pages. A slight breeze would turn those pages as they dried and it did all afternoon. It gave you a weird feeling to see the book turning with no one there.

RS: Where did you stay in Rexburg after the water subsided and you left?

VB: We went to Jack VanHoutan's, a friend of ours, up on the hill. My wife and the motor home there and we stayed for three days. Then we went up to my father's place in Teton City. We stayed in the motor home there for about a month.

RS: Then did you move back to Sugar City?

VB: Yes. It was just too much chasing up and down the highway trying to get here to do your work.

RS: What was your wife's reaction when you brought her back home?

VB: She thought that it was pretty bad. She naturally felt bad. But the only way to get it back into shape is to get with the project and get it done.

RS: What was the most cherished item that you lost in the flood?

VB: I think it would be the books that a person accumulates in time and can no longer buy because they are not printed anymore. Also my wife had a doll that was her mother's when she was a small girl. It was still in the house, but the water had ruined it. That cannot be replaced.

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

VB: For the inside we had aunts and cousins from Idaho Falls come and clean. I borrowed a tractor with a front end loader and cleaned up the outside. I wanted to clean up my own property up and stake it out on the road. The people that came around to scoop things up just dug big holes. They had a lot to do and they didn't take the time to go easy on the property. I cleaned my own property.

RS: Were there some problems that you found frustrating.

VB: Normally you take water coming out of your water taps for granted. You turn them on and the water is there. After the flood they got the water going back in the water mains for the city, but it was never a sure thing. It would be on for a couple of hours and then it would be off for the rest of the day and all that night. Then it might be on only a short time again. You never knew when it was going to come on. You always had to have some water storage on hand. I found this frustrating.

RS: You mentioned that your family came up immediately to help in the cleanup. Did you have any of the volunteers help in cleaning up your property?

VB: Yes. A little later on after we had started the outside work, we had the volunteers come. They really did a good job. Within a few days Nathan Larsen, a good friend of ours, came over to help. Leon was still there with us and we did a lot of work inside of the house. I felt that that was the most important thing and it should take place first before the outside cleanup.

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

VB: I'll have my wife, Connie, elaborate on that question.

CB: To me, the miraculous thing was that had all been a rerun to me. Years ago, I had seen all this happening in a dream. I was up on a hill and something was happening. I couldn't tell what it was. Even the church house was ruined. The whole horrible feeling

came back to me at the time fo the flood. While I was standing on the hill and watching what was happening, the dream came back to me. So as we cleaned up, it was as if I was reliving that dram all over again.

RS: Do you still have that dream? Does that feeling still come back to you occasionally or has it left you?

CB: No, it has gone. I do not have the feeling anymore. Everything is now at peace. Three or four months before this happened; I had an idea that something was going to happen. I kept trying to think what in the world it would be.

My mother had been very ill and I thought that maybe it would be related to hat. I thought that maybe she was going to pass on. I got this feeling that his was going to happen and to be prepared for something. When it came I knew what was going to happen, I felt that I had done it all before.

RS: Did you experience any vandalism, looting or any other forms of lawlessness?

VB: No, we didn't. I think that they did a really good job in sealing up the area. Even though I had proof that I lived in Sugar City, it wasn't easy to get in. they weren't going to let me through. I had heard of people that had things that were there and then it came up missing later. As far as ourselves, we suffered no vandalism. We were here almost all of the time afterwards and we lived here in front of the house.

RS: Did you notice any unusual people wandering around after the flood who look suspicious?

VB: I don't recall of anyone.

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

VB: Three days after the flood, the Red Cross was there. They did a fine job of getting in here right away and helping. The church was here immediately, too. Later, the Small Business Administration and the Bureau of Reclamation came to help. For all of these government aids, it is entirely too much red tape. They were wanting to know things that I felt meant nothing to them. I can see their point, too. Some people were probably trying to get all that they could get when they had nothing in the first place. I guess that they had a tough job to do.

RS: Do you think that they did a fairly good job?

VB: All in all, I think that they did.

RS: What kind of help did you receive from the Red Cross?

VB: The Red Cross came with a form that you could fill out and get a certain amount of money for clothing and food. Then they came around in a van and furnished sandwiches for the workers while they were working.

RS: While you lived her in those early stages, there obviously wasn't a lot of power and water for you to use. Where did you go to eat you meals during that period?

VB: We ate at the Command Post at the high school gymnasium. The church had set the operation up. Wards from Idaho Falls and other areas outside of the flood zone contributed to that.

RS: Was there a pretty good feeling among the community there at the evening meals?

VB: Yes. I didn't ever feel the tension getting high and leading to a quarrel or fighting. I thought that it was great.

RS: Did you have any cause to deal with state authorities? Besides the roadblocks, were there any other state agencies that you dealt with after the flood?

VB: No.

RS: Were the state police demands unreasonable during the roadblocks in your opinion?

VB: They had their orders and they had to follow them. I had proof that I lived in Sugar City and I needed to go there. But they wouldn't let me through.

One day when I was in Rexburg, they said that I could not go, I told them what I was doing here and that I had been over there several times already. Leon was with me and we just looked at each other and said, "We are going to Sugar City." Then we drove through and went to Sugar City. They didn't do anything.

RS: How about county officials or local Sugar City officials, did you have any problems with them?

VB: No.

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

VB: Yes. I think some of those people picked up items that didn't belong to them. I think that they took them because they were right in the middle of these things. Al

Although they were to have some government officials working with these groups to watch for this sort of thing, I am sure that it still happened.

RS: There was quite a bit of comment on the high wages that were paid to workers. Were you aware of the people who were receiving those salaries? How do you think they might have affected the recovery operation?

VB: Yes, they had some high salaries. Contractors with equipment received high pay whether they were on a construction job or here. I thought that their pay was high.

RS: Yes, they had some high salaries. Contractors with equipment received high pay whether they were on a construction job or here. I thought that their pay was high.

RS: Do you think that might have had some inflationary impact on our community?

VB: It probably did at that time. I think that we have forgotten it by now. Then it seemed serious to the people of the community.

RS: Without divulging names, were you aware of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

VB: Yes. I have heard of a couple that claimed more than I knew they had. To my knowledge they got away with it. I feel this situation was just a matter of your own personal claim and your conscience. The people in Sugar City were aware of this too and they were quite reasonable in their claims.

RS: Do you think for the most part that people were honest in their dealings about the flood claims?

VB: I would say that the majority were honest. But you always get these bad apples that make it bad for the rest.

RS: A year has passed since the disaster. Do you see it now as some type of divine punishment or as a natural man-made disaster?

VB: I think that it was just one of those things that came about. I have heard of some controversy on this subject. I think that it was going to happen.

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

VB: Yes. I think so from the standpoint of flood control. The Teton River floods over often in the spring. It gets both farms and the people who live close to it. Also, the advantage of irrigation would come under the Teton Dam. I think that it should be rebuilt. I am sure that the next time they put it in, it would be to stay.

RS: You don't think that you would lose any sleep at night if the dam were up in the canyon after having experienced the first flood?

VB: I would feel secure. I don't know what my family or others would think. Like I said, if they build it again, you can bet your life that I will be to stay this time.

RS: Has this disaster changed your life?

VB: I will leave this question up to my wife to answer.

RS: I think that it has changed our lives because we can see now that the worldly things are not that important things. They can be washed away in an hour or two and gone and mutilated. The things that really count are the things such as family. They are lasting. The talents that you have and the knowledge that you gain are important. These things cannot be washed away or destroyed. The flood washed away and destroyed things.

I feel that this is the way it has changed our lives. We now look at the things that are more spiritual and eternal.

RS: Is your family closer now than they were before the flood?

CB: Yes. During the flood we didn't have the television and the kids found out that they had brothers and sisters. They learned to play together and to dream up things. We didn't have to entertain them. They entertained themselves. Home evenings were tremendous because we would take rides on our bikes every Monday and see the progress of the city.

One evening we gathered up odds and ends that had floated by and cinderblocks. The kids built a clubhouse with these things. They spent many hours fixing up this clubhouse. As people would get back into their homes and they had carpet that they didn't want, the children would go and ask them if they could have the scraps. The people would give it to them and they would put it in their clubhouse. They even spent one night in the clubhouse and thought that it was great. They had to be a bit careful. When they got up to go to the bathroom because when they shined the flashlight, the police came by and wanted to know what was going on.

The police were really on the ball. As you laid in bed you could see those lights going across your bed. The police were checking all the homes. It gave you a feeling that you were in a war zone. It really brought us closer together and we can depend on each other now.

RS: How has the disaster affected the community of Sugar City?

VB: It changed the whole of the city itself, houses and buildings. All of Sugar City would now become a new Sugar City.

RS: Is there more of a neighborly attitude among people as a result of the flood?

VB: I was just thinking of that as you asked that question. I have heard this comment: “Well, Sugar City isn’t like it used to be. The people have lost the antique feeling of Sugar City. Many of the older people have left now and they didn’t come back.” The attitude of people changed, but they still get along great.

RS: What do you see down the road two or three years? Will the building boom continue? Do you think that they are over building?

VB: Yes, I think that a lot of people have over built. I don’t think that their income has changed. I don’t blame them for their houses; they can do as they please. It looks to me like some people are going to be in financial trouble later on. Instead of paying \$150 for taxes, they are going to get \$900.

The building boom will have to go on for another year until the people get their homes built. Then the contracting will really drip off because everything will be built.

RS: Do you think at that point that Rexburg and Madison County and Sugar City will revert back to the agricultural type of economy that they had prior to the flood?

VB: Yes. There will be a lot of people who went in on a building that will probably change to another job. Whether it will be agricultural again, I don’t know for sure.

RS: Thank you, Mr. Bird