

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Alyn B. Andrus – Life during the
Teton Flood

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A Brief Personal History of the Teton Dam Failure and Flood

The Day the Dam Broke

While the Teton flood disaster is still fresh on my mind, I want to write down a chronology of what happened to me the day the dam broke. I will also give my impressions of the flood and tell what I have done since the flood.

Saturday, June 5, 1976, was a beautiful day. The sky was clear. The temperature was warm, and there was no wind. It appeared to be the ideal Saturday- a Saturday for fun and games, rest and relaxation.

Gloria (my wife) and I were cleaning house. Daniel (our son) had just left for Moody to get his check for moving sprinkler pipe from Danny to get his check for moving sprinkler pipe from Danny Summers. The time was 11:45 am.

The telephone rang and I answered it. Gloria's friend, Marilyn Hansen, was calling. She said, "Alyn, if I put sod around my windows, will that keep the water out of my basement?" I answered, "Yes, I suppose so. What are you doing, irrigating?" she said, "Haven't you heard? The Teton Dam is washing away." My response must have been classic. I said, "You've got to be kidding." She said, "I'm not kidding. Turn on your radio and hear for yourself."

I turned on the radio and an announcer for KRXXK was saying "This is no joke. The Teton Dam is breaking up. A wall of water is cascading down Teton Canyon. All people who live on the lowlands east, north and west of Rexburg should go to high ground and stay there. Don't try and save anything. Just get your family in your car and go."

I went outside and told Gloria. By this time, I noticed an increase in the volume of auto traffic up the hill past our house. Also, people were coming out of their homes to gather in little groups and talk.

Gloria and I decided to finish cleaning the house, and to warn people in our area who lived off the hill and who would probably be flooded. Thus, she continued to do the house cleaning while I ran from house to house along the streets telling people about the coming floodwaters. Before I left the house, however, I called Danny Summers to see if Daniel had arrived. Moody was directly in the path of the floodwaters and Gloria and I were concerned that Daniel would not get out of the area before it was hit by the flood. No one answered at the Summer's residence, and that only increased our concern.

I finished warning the people about 1:30 and had started to return home when Daniel drove up, grinning from ear to ear. He said, "Hi, Dad." Seldom have I been so relieved as I was to see him.

I went back to via Main Street which was almost deserted by this time. Police were patrolling the street in their cars. A few businessmen were taking a last anxious look at their stores. I passed the Valley Bank where someone had placed a string of plastic covering along the bottom of the doorway and had scattered gravel along the bottom of the doorway and had scattered gravel along the plastic to hold it down. Word had gone out by this time that the water along Main Street was not expected to be any deeper than two feet. Other information, however, was that Teton City was inundated and a fifteen foot wall of water was approaching Sugar City. No one knew what to believe, but I was certain that the floodwaters would be deeper than two feet on Main Street. In time, the radio station informed us that Teton City had not been hit by the

flood, and the water was expected to be from four to six feet deep in Rexburg. I felt that our house would be safe enough because I estimated its elevation above Main Street to be about twenty feet.

By the time that I arrived home, people had begun to gather in crowds along our street. Cars were streaming up the street. Police sirens could be heard all over town. Airplanes and helicopters were flying overhead. The fire siren could be heard, periodically, warning people of the coming of the flood.

I had often wondered what Rexburg would be like in the face of disaster, and now I was finding out. Everyone was quite calm, which was reassuring, but the sirens and aircraft made life in Rexburg seem unreal and a little frightening.

I had also wondered what floodwaters would do to Rexburg if the Teton Dam should ever rupture. Now I would soon find out, and the thought sickened me.

As reports came over the radio about where the floodwaters were and what they were doing to the countryside, I kept thinking of the thousands of horses and cattle that were struggling vainly for their lives in the rushing waters. Reports that I heard later said that when horses and cattle saw they could not outrun the water, they would turn and dash into it, perhaps wanting to hasten what they sensed to be certain death.

About 2:00, Marilyn Hansen called to ask if she and her children could come over to our house and stay with us during the afternoon and evening. They came and brought with them Marilyn's sister-in-law and her children. I suggested to Gloria that we drain off all the fresh water we could, for surely the flood would pollute our water supply. Also, Gloria and I decided that the toilets should be flushed sparingly because there would undoubtedly be sewer problems.

The floodwater hit the northeast outskirts of Rexburg at about 2:30. By 3:00, we stood on our front lawn and watched it roll over Smith Park and across 3rd East. It rose to five feet on Main Street, bringing with it dead animals, exploding gas tanks, cars, trucks, tractors, houses and all kinds of debris. We could hear the water as it hit buildings. We could hear crunching sounds, and walls crashing to pieces. We saw a complete house crash into a pine tree and come to rest in the middle of a street. Only then did we begin to sense how destructive this flood would be.

I set up a tape recorder and began recording a description of the flood for Steve, our missionary son, who, at the time, was in northern Arizona working with the Apache Indians. I had not talked into the recorder long until I heard a tremendous explosion in the northwestern part of town, and saw a billowing cloud of black smoke coming from where I estimated the sawmill to be. I later learned that a gasoline bulk plant near the sawmill and exploded and burned. Shortly after this, another fire broke out in a house west of Porter Park and burned the house to the ground.

I left the recorder and walked down to the water's edge where I took some pictures. By this time, I felt that the floodwater had crested, so I decided to walk over to the Rexburg Fourth Ward Church building to see if any water had gotten into it. I was certain that it had, and was surprised therefore, to see that the church had not been touched by the flood or mud. The water flowed across part of the parking lot, and missed the church by a few feet. I was relieved to see this because I thought we could now use the building for a headquarters during the emergency and as a temporary shelter for the homeless if necessary.

I found Bishop Jacobs, and he invited me to go with him to a meeting involving other bishops and stake presidents of the flood area. The meeting lasted about an hour—just long enough to discuss how to organize to meet the emergency. In this meeting, President Ferron Sonderegger of the North Rexburg Stake, announced that he had been in touch with the General Authorities of the Church, and welfare machinery was already operating to meet the needs of flood victims.

No one laughed or joked in this meeting. The men who were there were somber. I got the impression they wanted to cry, and were fighting to hold back the tears.

Following our meeting with the stake presidents and bishops, Bishop Jacobs and I went to the bishop's office in the Fourth Ward building and attempted to organize the priesthood to take care of those people in our own ward who had been flooded out of their homes. We knew this was a situation which would test the efficiency and effectiveness of our home teachers, and so we tried to handle flood problems through the home teachers and priesthood quorums at first. Before long, however, we saw that our home teachers could not be relied upon in most cases to give immediate and continuous assistance to flood victims. As it turned out, we used a few reliable home teachers, mostly from the high priest group, and leaders of the high priest's group in the ward to do most of the work that had to be done. We were able to administer a tremendous amount of assistance during the weeks that followed, but only because a handful of ward leaders and a few home teachers did most of the organizing, surveying, supervising, and other work that we expected home teacher to do.

The most sensible reason I can give as to why the home teachers did not function effectively during this emergency, then we dismissed them and cancelled all other meetings. We went home, changed, and started mucking out houses.

After our bishop's meeting on June 5, I went home and found that Gloria had everything well in hand. I went out on the deck from which I could look west over Rexburg, and turned on the tape recorder to finish my account of the flood for Steve. As I sat there talking into the recorder, I became very conscious of a strange, almost eerie feeling I had about the city. The time was about 10:00 p.m. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and darkness was enveloping Rexburg. There was the smell of water, mud, diesel and burning things. I could hear the lowing of cattle from various parts of the city—animals surviving the flood had sought refuge in the city and were wandering through the streets, over lawns and into buildings. I heard the drone and beat of helicopters as they flew out over the floodwaters searching for survivors. Then, as night came on, I was aware that flooded Rexburg was without light. The only lights to be seen were on the hill. The rest of the city was dead.

I felt isolated and uncomfortable when I realized that for miles of the west and north, there was little or nothing more than devastation—ruined farms, wrecked homes and businesses filled with water, mud and debris. That night, I felt that we lived on the very edge of desolation.

CLEANUP OPERATIONS

Sunday morning, June 6, Gloria and I rode around the business district of Rexburg before I went to priesthood meeting. We were astonished. Words cannot describe adequately what we saw and how we felt. I remarked to her, "It was as if someone had declared war on Rexburg and Rexburg had lost." Mud and debris were all over. Buildings were wrecked. Cars, trucks, tractors, and trees were scattered around the streets and throughout lots and buildings. Houses had been moved off their foundations. Some had collapsed and were now great heaps of junk. Light poles were down. Some were suspended only by the lines they had previously supported. The task of cleaning up looked insurmountable. At that time, I was certain that cleanup alone would require all summer. As Gloria and I made our way home, we were overwhelmed by all that we saw, and for an instant, I felt sadness and helplessness that I had never felt before.

Cleanup operations began on Sunday, June 6. No Sunday services were held in the Upper Snake River Valley on that day- everyone was mucking out houses. Gloria, Daniel and I got together a little crew and started cleaning Alice Tout's house. We also helped Eldon Hard clean out his basement.

Alice Tout had no basement, so we simply moved all the furniture either outside or into one corner of a room, then we commenced to scoop out the mud with snow shovels. Mud was about one inch thick covered throughout the house. We started in the back rooms and gradually worked our way toward the front door. This house was full of expensive, elegant furniture, and to think that much of it would have to be destroyed nearly made me sick. One might wonder why it could not be salvaged, but the water weakened the glue until it lost its bonding power, and frequently furniture would just fall to pieces. Besides, we found that in most cases, furniture warped and cracked so severely that repair was out of the question.

Eldon Hart had a full basement under his house, all of which was divided into rooms. The basement, of course, was full of water and several inches of mud. The first task was to remove the water. This was done by using a large liquid-manure spreader operated by a diesel tractor. The spreader was a tank of one-thousand gallon capacity, with a large hose and pump attached. The tractor power for the pump.

After the water was removed, the next job was to carry out the furniture and debris. This was a filthy and revolting task. Everything was water soaked and covered with mud. The debris looked as though it had been washed in from a barnyard. The smell was repulsive- remarkably like a pigpen or a potato cellar with rotten potatoes in it. By the time we finished hauling out furniture and removing debris, we were wet and covered with mud from head to feet, I never dreamed I would see people wallowing in filth like the cleanup crews did following the flood. Men, women and children wallowed in mud with a driving desire to clean out their stinking homes.

Finally, after furniture and debris were removed, we were ready to pump out the mud. This was done by running water into the basement to dilute the mud, and by moving the diluted mud toward the suction hose by means of snow shovels, scoop shovels, and large brooms. We would start in the most remote rooms and work toward the room in which the house was placed.

After the basement was cleaned out, walls and ceilings were stripped from studs and floor joists. All insulation was removed and destroyed. All doors and windows were opened, and drying out began.

This was the procedure followed in each basement in which I worked. I helped “muck out” twenty-five homes. As a matter of fact, I organized crews who went from place to place pumping out water and mud, and cleaning the homes. Frequently, I directed several crews, all operating at the same time in different homes. A crew normally consisted of from four to ten men. We worked from nine in the morning until about eight or nine in the evening. When I would get home, I would shower and collapse on the bed. Seldom have I been as tired as I was for two weeks while I “mucked out” flooded homes.

I was impressed with the way in which people worked during the cleanup. Nearly everyone got involved and got muddy. Neighbors would trade time and service. Those who were not flooded worked along with those who were, donating their time and energy. Volunteers from outside the county worked as hard as the flood victims in mucking out homes and businesses.

I can give two examples of how generously people donated time and effort in cleanup operations. My brothers, Kendall and Robert, spent everyday for two weeks in Rexburg helping clean up. Kendall got farmers from Milo where he lives to donate their tractors, manure pumps, and fuel for a period of two weeks. Kendall hauled these outfits to Rexburg on this transport, and when they were through, we hauled them back. To get an idea of the personal sacrifice these men made in terms of dollars, multiply \$6.00 per hour, as a minimal cost of man and machine, by 10 working hours per day. Then multiply this answer by 12 days that they worked. The product of these multiplications is \$720 per man. Of course, under emergency circumstances such as there were, a man and his machine could demand and get significantly more money than \$6.00 per hour, in which case, the total contribution per man would be much higher than \$720.

Another example, involves volunteers organized and sent into the flood-area by the Mormon Church. These people came to Rexburg by bus loads from places as far away as Salt Lake City, Utah, and Twin Falls, Idaho. They paid their own bus fare which in some cases amounted to \$6.00. They brought their own lunches and tools, and many came for more than one day. On some days, the church dispersed several thousand people through the flood area to assist with cleanup. One day I helped to disperse and supervise over 600 people who came from Brigham City, Utah. Most of these worked in an area making up about three city blocks. At the same time, other thousands of volunteers were working in other parts of the city.

Church members who were big-equipment operators and contractors hauled in front-end loaders, and brought their dump trucks into the flood area. For the most part, all of this equipment, and its operating expense, was donated. To illustrate, I tell the following experience: One day I needed a front-end loader to keep a couple of trucks busy hauling debris from a city lot. I noticed a bit outfit on a transport with a California license plate. Two men were sitting in a pickup truck by the transport. I asked them if they belonged to the machine. They said they did. I asked them if they wanted to work and they said they sure did. I then asked them if they were there to earn money or to donate their machine. They said they were from California, and their boss had sent them to the disaster area to make money in cleanup operations. One week later, I noticed their

outfit was still loaded on the transport, and the transport had been moved. So many big machines had been donated for cleanup; there was no need for one to be hired.

Ricks College played a major role during the flood-day and in post-flood activities. On the day the flood came, people were evacuated their homes were instructed to register at the college. Subsequently, they were assigned rooms in the college dormitories. They stayed in these rooms until the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found them other temporary shelter. Some, however, remained in the dorms until the students began returning to Ricks for the 1976-1977 school year.

In addition to providing rooms, the college food services served from 18,000 to 32,000 meals each day. Most of the food served came from the Church Welfare recourses.

Finally, the college served as headquarters for government agencies involved in disaster operations. Most of these agencies were located in the field house of the Physical Education building or in trailer houses parked on college parking lots. Without the college, the distress of thousands of homeless people would have gone unmitigated for an extended period of time.

I was impressed with how optimistic and convivial people were during cleanup operations. Their sense of humor was delightful. For example, an announcement in a church meeting was that there would be a “watered down version” of Whoopee Days in Rexburg on July 4. (Whoopee Days is Rexburg’s annual July 4 celebration.)

My son, Daniel, ad four boyfriends have organized a rock bad. They play for dances in the area and call themselves, “Whitewater.” After the flood, they suggested changing the name of their band to “Floodwater” from “Madison” County.

One day I passed Dr. Keith Zollinger’s elegant, but flooded home. I noticed a sign truck in the front yard which read, “Texas Slough.”

Finally, during Rexburg’s “watered down” version of Whoopee Days, a local artist named Don Ricks drove his van down Main Street with a sign painted on it which read something like this: Welcome to ‘Wrecksburg’ by courtesy of the Bureau of ‘Wrecklamation.’”

WORKING FOR SENATOR CHURCH

One June 21, I received a telephone call from George Klein who manages Senator Frank Church's office in Boise, Idaho. Senator Church was setting up a temporary flood disaster office in Idaho Falls, and needed a Democrat, preferably from the flood area, to help staff the office. Richard Stallings recommended me, and I was hired for the summer.

George Klein, Randy Furniss (Senator Church's staff member in Pocatello, Idaho), and I manned the office in Idaho Falls. We went to work at 8:30 am and closed the office at 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday until August 27.

In the office, our job was to help flood victims cut through government "red tape," and deal effectively with agencies such as Housing and Urban Development, Small Business Administration, Soil Conservation Service, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, and the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration. There were agencies other than these with whom we dealt less frequently.

Perhaps three examples taken from our files in the office will demonstrate what the problems were like with which we dealt, and how we dealt with them. These examples involve the Bureau of Reclamation, Housing and Urban Development, and the Small Business Administration.

Case 1

On June 23, _____ called Senator Church's office to say that he owned a farm in Menan, 150 acres of which were under water as a result of the flood. The Department of Health notified _____ that the flooded area constituted a health hazard, and the water would have to be pumped off. _____ went to Soil Conservation Service and was told to hire pumps and charge the expense to SCS. Later SCS informed _____ that it would not absorb the expense.

_____ had already hired Burggraf Construction Company to pump the water. At this point, he called us, asking that we get the government to pay pumping expenses. I wrote a summary of _____'s problem and sent it to our congressional representative at the Federal Disaster Assistance Center, requesting a written reply. Shortly after, I received a call from the Bureau of Reclamation assuring us that the Bureau would pay the pumping expenses for _____. Subsequently, pumping operations began on the _____ farm, and three weeks later _____ thanked me for the help he received from the Senator's office.

Case 2

On July 13, Mrs. _____ called the office and talked to me about a problem she was having with Housing and Urban Development. _____ and her family qualified for a HUD trailer as a result of the flood. A trailer was pulled onto their property, and left for two weeks without being hooked up to water, sewer or electricity. Mr. _____, during this time, was recovering in the hospital from back surgery. At the time, Mrs. _____ called the Senator's office, her husband was ready to come home, but there was no home to come to, and the hospital bill was growing needlessly.

I called HUD about Mrs. _____'s problem, and HUD put her on top priority. The following day, HUD and the trailer strapped down, hooked up to sewer, water, and electricity. It was ready to clan and occupy. Mrs. _____ was delighted. On July 15, she brought her husband home from the hospital, and thanked us for the help we had been able to extend.

Case 3

Mr. _____ lives in Firth. His house was damaged by the flood. He applied to the Small Business Administration for a loan, and then filed his claim of loss with the Bureau of Reclamation. He had not heard either from the SBA or the Bureau when he called us. He was anxious to get his house repaired, but had no money. He wanted the Senator's office to speed up SBA and the Bureau.

I called SBA and found that _____'s loan had been approved and he could expect his first check in a few days. I called the Bureau and was told the loss verifier would call the next day for an appointment to verify _____'s losses in the claim. I called _____ and told him this. I also told him to think seriously about withdrawing his claim and resubmitting it after he had used his SBA money to repair his home. He would then have firm figures and documentary evidence to present to the Bureau. He said he hadn't thought of proceeding that way, but it sounded reasonable, and he would think about it.

Most of the people who called the Senator's Office, we were able to help. Frequently, we did nothing more than help them cut through a maze of government "red tape," or intervene to see that a government agency didn't give them the "run around," but they were very grateful for these small favors and would declare their undying faith in and devotion to Frank Church.

The climax to my summer's work came when Senator Church toured the disaster area during August 17 through 19. I met him then for the first time, and on the morning of the 17th, I had the privilege of driving him from Idaho Falls to Rexburg in my Ford Pinto. On the way we talked about the flood and the disaster problems. During the rest of that day and the two days which followed, I was with him most of the time, and concluded that he is an effective leader and a sincere representative to the people.

I was amazed to see how people flocked around him wherever we went, eager to talk with him about their problems. They seemed to feel that if they could only explain their problems to him, he would be able to solve them to everyone's satisfaction. When people still feel this way about a man who has been in political office as long as Senator Church has been, I believe this is eloquent testimony of his ability to lead.

During the tour, we visited Rexburg, St. Anthony, Roberts, and Blackfoot. At each place, we met the people in a predetermined place such as the courthouse or a school auditorium. For the first hour to hour and a half at each place, the Senator met with the people in a public meeting during which they were invited to ask questions, present complaints and discuss problems of general nature. Throughout this meeting, the Senator had him the heads of government agencies such as the Bureau, HUD, SBA, and the FDAA to answer questions and head complaints. This gave the agencies a clear idea about what the problems were that flood victims were encountering.

After each public meeting, the Senator met with people individually on a first-come-first served basis. Each of these conferences lasted only about five minutes, but

seemed to help the people feel that the Senator was interested in the personal problems of those whom he represents.

I appreciate the opportunity of having worked for Senator Church this summer. It has been a rewarding educational experience for me in government operation, and at the same time it has given me the chance to be of service to those whose lives were hit so hard by the flood.

CONCLUSIONS

So far as the flood itself is concerned, and the multitudinous problems it generated, this summer is, of course, one I'll never forget. It is also one that I'm glad to have behind me, and I suppose all others involved in the flood feel the same way. Even so, in some ways, the flood was a blessing to the people of the Upper Snake River Valley.

In the first place, it brought them face to face with the unpleasant realization that we in the valleys of the mountains are not protected from, and immune to large scale disasters. Disasters are a distinct possibility and we must be prepared for them emotionally and physically. In this connection, perhaps we who experience extreme hardship. And out of this empathy and sympathy, perhaps, will come help and solutions to problems that otherwise may have gone unsolved.

In the second place, the flood has demonstrated, I think that people today have the faith, courage, determination and tenacity to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems and unbearable hardships just as their ancestors had. The flood, I think, has helped people to rejuvenate faith in themselves to face hardship and deal with different situations.

Finally, the flood has provided a situation for the LDS church in the Upper Snake River to test its organization in dealing with