

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Trudy Clements – Life during the
Teton Flood

By Trudy Clements

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Box 5 Folder 34

Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

CS: Trudy will you spell your name please?

TC: Trudy Clements.

CS: Thank you. Trudy, how old are you?

TC: Twenty-two.

CS: And where were your born?

TC: Here in Rexburg.

CS: Have you lived here all your life?

TC: Pretty much, except for, just surrounding areas like Ririe, and Idaho Falls for a little while.

CS: Now, prior to the flood, did you own your own home?

TC: No, we were renting.

CS: I see, and what was your address at the time of the flood?

TC: It is the same as it is now, 75 ½ East 1st North.

CS: Now, do you have a family?

TC: Well, we have one little girl, she wasn't here at the time of the flood.

CS: I see, so it was just you and your husband?

TC: Right.

CS: And what do you do for a living? Are you employed at all?

TC: No, I'm not, I was at the time I was working here at Ricks College and my husband is working for Dell Virgin Electric.

CS: Now, prior to the construction of the dam, had you thought at all about it? Were you in favor of or were you opposed to it, the construction of the dam?

TC: Well, I was in favor of the construction of the dam because I had lived here in Rexburg and each year it seemed like if there was a large amount of snow, there was always flooding in the areas just around the Teton River, and it just seemed like that was a waste of water and land and so I felt like if the dam was there, they could control that

water a little better and that there wouldn't be as much flooding and there would be a better use for the water.

CS: Now, that morning when the dam broke, do you recall where you were and what you were doing when you first heard the news and what was your reaction to that news?

TC: My parents live here in town, my dad had this building that he wanted to do some work on and so there was my brother and my husband and my dad and a couple of my other brothers that were helping on this building and they went down town to get some more materials when they heard about it and my husband called us because we were all outside and didn't have the radio on. He called us and told us to turn the radio on; they had heard that the Teton Dam had broken. My husband is the kind of person that likes to tease a lot so when I heard that, I just thought he was teasing me and he said, "No, I'm not teasing, turn on the radio on and listen." He said, "We will be home in just a few minutes...." Then after my dad and my husband got over to my parents place, we decided that if it did break, we didn't think that there would be too much water that we might have to be away from the home a couple of days so we decided we would go to our place and mom would get what food and bedding that she had. They were telling us to evacuate at that time, and so we went over to our apartment and got a few things. My husband and myself did go downtown and thought we would be able to get a few things at the grocery store. We went into one grocery store and just got up to the check stand and they hadn't heard about it and so my husband informed them as soon as he informed them, they said that they couldn't check us out, that they were closing their store, so we went over to the other one and they had known about it and they did check us out, with just a few food items. But after the first store wouldn't check us out, I was kinda panicky, I thought, "Well, maybe it's more than we're expecting."

CS: When you were gone to your home, did you make any preparations there as far as moving anything, trying to get anything ready?

TC: Well, our apartment would be safe, the only thing that we took was a few clothes, like some bedding because we didn't know where we were going to be spending the night, whether we would be able to get back to our apartment so we didn't make any preparations.

CS: Where did you go then, when you finally left downtown and that area?

TC: We went up to the college, that's where they were telling us to evacuate to higher ground. My dad puts machinery together for a living and so there was a farmer that had a piece of property just up from the college and he had told us that we were welcomed up there on these farms so we were just a little bit above the college area.

CS: And were you able to see the water when it finally came in?

TC: Oh, yes, it was different because they kept saying that it was coming and you couldn't see anything and it had been almost two and two and a half hours from the time

we left home till the water actually hit Rexburg. My dad had a pair of field glasses with him when he had left and my brother had his camera with him. You could just see the water, you know, it was just brown and you could just see it coming in. It was kinda exciting at the time, seeing the water come in and seeing houses floating and until we could see that it was going to hit my parents' place. I knew it was going to hit ours because we were living on the north side of town and we just kept thinking that the water is not going to come that far into Rexburg. And then after it did, the realization didn't actually hit then but you knew there was water at least we thought in the basement. We didn't know whether there was any father than that.

CS: How did the other people or the other people around you, how did they seem to be reacting to it, were the people pretty calm, or?

TC: Well, there was several people, I mean there was cars, all the way up the hill, but the people all seemed about the same way. It was kinda an exciting day, you know, hadn't really thought of what the consequences were going to be. It was just kinda an exciting feeling, people joking and laughing and they just felt like we might get three or four feet of water and there won't be that much to worry about and it might be a day before we got back in, but at the time it was just waiting and that anticipation for the water to get there. Then after it had come through Rexburg, and you could tell it was going farther, then that was when you started making plans. You could see, cause we did go down after it had come through Rexburg how far it had come up and how deep it was, you could go right to the edge of the water and you could tell there was more water then people had thought there was coming. Then is when you had to decide, you had to make plans as to what you were going to do from there.

CS: Now, where did you stay that night, and for the next few days?

TC: Okay, I have a sister that lives in Ririe and so we went up over the dry farm and down into Ririe, there was myself and husband and two other families, my brother and his family and my parents and their family that stayed with them for a week. We did come in the next morning, into town.

CS: I was going to ask you went you first were able to return to your home and what did you find?

TC: Well, it was the next morning that we come into Rexburg and we went over to look at our apartment, and saw that the apartment was okay, and then we went over to my parent's place and they really got hit bad. But we weren't able to go back to our apartment for about a week, because we didn't have electricity and things like that. After we did get back in, we didn't have any hot water for almost, I guess it was about two or three weeks. We just heated water on top of the stove for the little bit of washing we had to do. But for a week almost a week and a half, we stayed primarily out at my sister's house as far as sleeping and eating. I prepared the lunch meals at our apartment because the men were working at my parent's house and they couldn't fix it at the hose because

they didn't have a stove. But, other than that we were like everyone else, couldn't get back into their homes.

CS: Now, was there any damage done to your apartment at all, or had the water just not gotten there?

TC: Well, there was steps that went into the garage to get to the apartment and it got up about the second to the top step so there wasn't any actual water upstairs, we did have a few things that were stored down in the garage that got ruined but as far as personal things, we didn't lose much except for a few things I still had over at my mom's. She was storing them because we hadn't been married very long.

CS: Now, about your parents, when you went over there with them, I mean, this was the home that you had been brought up in and how did you feel when you saw that and what kind of things had happened there?

TC: It's hard to explain the feelings that you have. Because most of my material things had been taken to our apartment when we were married, as far as material things, there wasn't too much there. But my parents had just finished remodeling their house, not more than a year from the time of the flood, it was just, mostly the reaction of my mom. There was so many things- sentimental things- that she had that were gone and that's where it hit me, watching her and her reaction to things. She didn't know where to turn. Everything she had in her life, except her family was in that house. She cried a lot, she didn't have the heart to do anything but look and cry. It just seemed like there was no way that it could be cleaned up, you know, but we didn't know where to turn next. So that first day, they just got in and started pulling things out. After that first day, it still didn't look like they had made any accomplishment. After that, because of my mom not taking it as well, you know, she took it pretty good, but she just couldn't face going back to the mud and things. They would bring clothes and things that needed to be washed and we would wash them in Ririe so we didn't actually go back into Rexburg after that first day for a couple of days. We spent the rest of the time washing clothes and then by that time they got the majority of...the men had gotten most of the mud and that type of thing out. Then it was left to washing dishes and that type of thing that we did, do right there and stayed there and did that. By that time she had kinda got adjusted to it. I do know that there were several people that were really concerned. My husband's parents live in Idaho Falls and they couldn't get through on the telephone lines after the flood came through. And several brothers and sisters that lived out of state. They did call my sister in Ririe and were able to get a hold of us and that was the most important thing at the time, letting everyone know that we were okay and none of us were actually hurt in the incident.

CS: Now, in the cleanup process like with your parents' home, was it mostly family that helped you work on the house, or did you have any of the volunteers that came in on the buses that helped?

TC: For the first little while it was just the family. I come from a large family so there was a lot of help and mom and dad felt like that the people that didn't have so much family close that they needed the help right at the time. They did have some volunteer helpers that came in and helped clean up around the yard and scrubbed the walls and things like that.

CS: And how do you think that...

TC: They were just so appreciative of that, having the people there. I know in the ward that I live in, we were the only people that weren't actually affected with the flood and there just wasn't words to explain the help and the appreciation for the help and things that most people brought in. Them being fresh and clean everyday and most of the time it just gave you a renewed spirit because they weren't so tired, and run-down after working all day that they just made you feel like you could do a little more today. That was mostly appreciated, the spirit that they brought in.

CS: Did you say that you were the only people in your ward that weren't actually damaged by the flood, how did you, you know, have you felt about that, you know, during the past year? Did that ever cause you any sort of guilt feeling? That's rather a strange question, but did you ever get the reaction from other people that you are pretty lucky, you know, nothing happened to you?

TC: Yes, at first I felt like, you know, why didn't it happen to us? But then I had a feeling that we could be, well we didn't have to worry about our own personal things so we could be of more help to the people that needed help. There was several people that would say, you know, you are really lucky, you still have all your things. But I don't think there was any real resentment as far as, you know, not being affected by losing material things and not having to clean up the mud. I know that we did have people in our home to eat and things like that. And because I didn't have a family, little kids to worry about, mostly on my own, my husband and I could just go wherever we were needed at the time, help wherever we were needed.

CS: Now, in your work you saw the different organizations deal with the people like your parents and friends and neighbors and everything such as the Red Cross and the LDS Church and the government also, in the different things. How could you evaluate the kinds of services that they provided? Do you think that they were effective, these different groups in the work that they did?

TC: Well, I really think they were. I was very, very impressed by the Red Cross. I never had any association with the Red Cross before that, at the time, because the people around here seemed to be such a proud people, they hate to ask for help. I know in a lot of the government agencies and also with the Church they had to go either to their bishop or to the government agency and ask for help, where it seemed like the Red Cross was just there giving assistance, whether they asked for it or not. I know I heard so many people comment that the Red Cross was just more help... because right at that time they hated to ask for help. They needed to help but it seemed like the Red Cross was just in

there helping all the time, wherever they thought they could. I know that, whenever they ask for any donations for the Red Cross, now I know we give generously. I had never realized how much that they had helped, you know, in disaster situations. After things got a little more well organized, I do think that people got used to the waiting in line because there were so many people that had to be helped and things. They were appreciative of the help and thing they got. Most of the people that would help them didn't treat them like, "oh, not another one," but that each one was a person. I think after first initial week or two, they seemed to accept the other help that they were given and they didn't feel so bad about asking.

CS: Where you've been watching people over the last year and their reactions to what's happened to them, have you noticed any difference, do you think, between, say the old people, maybe the very old people and then the more middle-aged couples, and then the younger people between the reaction to the flood?

TC: Well, I have. I've seen a lot, the young people seem to be excited about the chance to rebuild and have something new and everything they have will be replaced. It's just an excitement; they have a chance to start all over again. Middle-aged people, I think, they feel like that we had these things and it's nice that we're going to be able to have these things again and they don't seem so, I don't know. A lot of times they wished they still had their older things that they didn't have to make those decisions again to build and what to do about their homes and things. Then the old people just seem like, "I'm not going to be here that much longer. I really don't want to rebuild, I'll just find something to live in temporary." They just don't want to put into a lot of expense and their values seem to be in different places, that they're more just living out their lives and not spending so much time, decisions that they have to make, since losing everything.

CS: Another question that's kind of interesting and I realize that this is just your personal opinion, but now you're LDS, is that right? Have you noticed, do you think, any differences in people's reaction to the flood and the loss that they've had between those who are non-LDS or else even between people who are active members of the church and those who are inactive? If you've been able to make any kind of comparisons like that.

TC: Well, I feel like those who are active in the church seem to have the opinion that the Lord has really blessed them and because they seem to be a little farther ahead. I know sometimes, I've heard people say, "Look at these people, they've got all these things and they are so much nicer than the things they had before. That they've taken advantage of the government in the money that they've given them." But I do know of several people that have their priorities in different places and have decided to go without some thing at this time so they could have a little larger house or, something that they needed because they had so many children or because they needed the space. I really don't think there's been too much difference between those that aren't members of the church and those who are inactive. I do feel like everyone around this area is trying to be fair with the government for the most part, as to what type of reimbursement that they are going to get from the government. I do know it seems like the people who aren't members of the church and those who are inactive. I do feel like everyone around this area is trying to be

fair with the government for the most part, as to what type of reimbursement that they are going to get from the government. I do know that it seems like the people who aren't members of church, maybe are just building back mostly what they had. It seemed like those that were members of the church, didn't have quite as much and so they are trying to be fair with the government for the most part, as to what type of reimbursement that they are going to get from the government. I do know that it seems like the people who aren't members of the church, maybe are just building back mostly what they had. It seemed like those that were members of the church, didn't have quite as much and so they are trying to build back a little better, little more, taking a little more care of their yard and things like that. Other than that, I can't see there's been too much difference between those who are members and that aren't.

CS: Now, also you've seen the community, like Rexburg, recovering and rebuilding over the last year. What sorts of positive things do you think are happening or have happened to Rexburg because of the flood experience and what sort of maybe negative things, if any, do you think are happening to the community as a whole?

TC: I think the looks of the downtown area, especially, if the older buildings were left because they didn't need to be torn down, it seems like they've done some remodeling on them and painted them and putting the fronts of them. Or it's looking like that. It's just improving the looks so much and then the new buildings that are coming in are so, you know, they look really nice. I think that they are really trying to build back a better community as far as looks and things. I've noticed the people for the most part are taking a little more pride in the way their yards look. And the appearance of their outside home as well as the inside. Maybe because they've just seen so much dirt and things in the yard that they just want it to look nice. Cause I do know that when we would go down to visit my husband's parents in Idaho Falls, the things I just couldn't quite get over was the green grass because there wasn't any here. It was just brown dirt all last summer. But I really can't think of any really negative things, except maybe the way some people have one idea about what to do with their property and then neighbors sometimes don't think they should do it to their property because they are afraid it's not going to look nice. I can just think of a couple of instances where the neighbors feel like the person owned a piece of land and it was farm land before. Not it's not worth farmland so they want to develop in other ways. The neighbors aren't exactly happy with the way they want to develop their land. To me, my personal opinion is that they should be able to develop the land the way that they want. But because it wasn't their fault they can't continue to farm, they've got to do something with that property or it just will depreciate things. I've just noticed that it seems like people are a little more concerned about what you're going to do with your property. They shouldn't have any concern because it's not their property. That's my opinion, but I don't know. I can't think of any negative things that I've seen. Everyone still seems to have that spirit of helping one another, for the most part.

CS: That's been some talk about contractors and subcontractors coming into town and, of course, with all this rebuilding, and taking advantage of people, because of the situation. Do you know of any cases where this has happened? Have you heard of any of this going on?

TC: I know of one instance. A lady that lives down the street from where we're living, she's a widow-lady and she was rebuilding a home. She bought a different piece of property than she had before. Then they got the house part way up and the contractor left town and she paid him partial payment. Then she had come to find out that he hadn't paid bills for the materials that he had used in the home. It just seemed like that they didn't know what they were going to do. I guess they did take it to court and they found the guy and they got another contractor to come in and her home's built. She's in her home and things seemed to work out and make sure that the contractors that you had were reputable contractors that you knew that they were going to finish the job when they started it. I know for a while she just didn't seem like she knew what she was going to do. That's the only I incident that I know of personally. I know of others, but I don't know the true the facts are on it and things like that.

CS: There's some talk about the cause of the dam breaking, and, of course, most people believe that it was a man-made mistake. Yet some people have expressed the idea that perhaps it was an act of divine retribution to punish the people. How would you feel about that?

TC: I feel like that it was a man-made mistake, because of the time than the dam had broke, because they had spotted leaks and thins earlier, I feel like it was something that man had done and that Heavenly Father had just waited till that time of the day. The farmers are all out in their fields trying to get their crops in and irrigating and things like that. It just happened at the time that people were in the homes for lunch and their radios on and I really think if it would have broke any other time of the day, there would have been more deaths in the flood. I don't feel like that the Lord was tying to punish us for things we'd done. I think you know that if you were doing something wrong at the time, those thoughts would be there. I'm sure everything that has been something that the Lord did to punish people because I don't think anyone can say that it was something that the Lord did to punish people because I don't think anyone can say that it was something that the Lord did to punish people because I don't think people have been punished at all. I mean, they had to go through that experience and through the work and the mud and things, but for the most part I think, if you took a poll of the people, most people would say they were better off now than they were before the flood, as far as experience and the material things.

CS: Now that there's talk about the dam being rebuilt, are you in favor of that and if so, would you be in favor of it in the same location?

TC: I feel like that there is a need for the dam because of the same reason I stated earlier, because of the water, so much being lost and that if we had a regular snowfall like we usually do, there would have been flooding again this spring in those areas right along the river. The water could be used in so many places but I do feel like maybe it shouldn't be in that same area that it could either be upstream or downstream but that they should, you know, search it out a little more because I've heard that they've still been putting grout and things into the holes and they still have it filled up and that it just didn't seem like it's

a good place to have a dam. If they did build it maybe they should use a little more concrete than dirt. I am still in favor of the dam being built.

CS: Now, as you've looked over this last year and the experience that you've personally gone through with your family and with neighbors and friends and just the impact of it on your life, what if any changed does this make in your attitude or beliefs or values or even perhaps your personality? And kind of changes that you would attribute to the flood itself?

TC: Well, I do know that after having seen experience of that day right after the flood, we went down into the Manwaring Center where most of the people were at the time. Just the panic that most of the mothers, I especially noticed at that time because I was expecting our first child, the panic that they had as to where they were going to feed their children or where they were going to get food. I know that's been a real concern to me and I have felt like I just maybe I've overdone it a little as far as being prepared for any type of disaster that would come again. If something happened, I would at least have food and clothing for my children. A lot of people think that I've maybe stored more than I need to store or buying storage items than might be necessary. Because of the experience of seeing, that was mostly the panic at the time right as people were there and know they were not going to be able to go back to their homes. Didn't know where they were going to sleep that night and whether there was going to be enough food to feed that many people because there were so many people there that day. Because of the breaking of the dam, I feel like I try to understand people a little better of their needs. There seemed to be a time when you were so concerned about, you just started thinking about people you knew and you hadn't seen them and you wondered where this person was or what they were doing. It seems to me there's been a closer unity as far as people and neighbors since the flood. That they're a little more friendly toward one another and they're interested in the things that they are doing. There isn't, "I live here and I'll do what I want to do and my neighbor lives here and I'll see him and wave to him if I happen to see," but not being neighbors. I think that there's more of that going on and just a feeling of closeness to think that you've been through something that they've been through and you have a common bond there. It seems like that when people move into the community because there's been so many that were actually here when the flood hit and then asking questions, it's hard to explain to them but yet, you feel like that you want to bring them in. That they are welcome here too. But those are the only changes I can think of.

CS: Well, I don't have any more specific questions. Are there any other thoughts or anything that you'd like to say at this time?

TC: I can't think of anything that, you know, I really don't think that some people have said how terrible it's all been, as you look back on it. It doesn't seem as bad. I don't know if I'd like to go through it ever year, but I really think it's helped me, at least in my understanding of how in a minute everything can be all right and then in the next minute there can be a disaster. You've got to accept things as they come. I really realized that you had to take one day at a time and that you couldn't think about what's going to happen

in a month or what's going to happen in a week. A week didn't seem to matter. Today, if I get this done then I won't worry about tomorrow until the next day because you're so tired.....