

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Verion Brown Cole – Life during the  
Teton Flood

By Verion Brown Cole

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Box 6 Folder 34

Oral Interview conducted by Ramon Widdison

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin and Alina Mower April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

W: Veion, will you spell your name?

C: Veion Brown Cole.

W: How old are you?

C: Sixty-three

W: Thank you. Where were you when you heard about the Teton Dam breaking?

C: On Saturday afternoon, June 5, I was driving from a café in Salt Lake City to the University Medical Center where my husband Roy was recovering from complete hip surgery. I had turned on the radio to listen to the news. It was about 2:30 p.m. The announcer said, "We interrupt this program to give you a special message. The Teton Dam has broken and all residents of Wilford, Sugar City, and Rexburg are asked to evacuate as quickly as possible." I started to cry and thought, "I've got to get hold of myself so I can tell Roy about it as calmly as possible." I went to his room and told him the news. He had been in the hospital 12 days and was doing quite well. When I told him, he said, "We've got to go home." Doctor Dunn told him he could be released the next morning.

We were terribly upset wondering what had happened to our family, our home, our business, and all our belongings. About 6:00 p.m. Renee, our youngest daughter, called and said that she and all the family were safe. We told her we were coming home and she said, "Don't come, stay there." Shortly after, our son, Boyd, called and told us he was safe and he too told us, "It's terrible, there's nothing left. It will be better if you don't see what happened."

Roy was released Sunday morning; we headed for home. We traveled to Blackfoot and were stopped there because the floodwaters were going over the Interstate. We stayed there overnight and the next morning we went up to Soda Springs and down through Palisades to Rexburg.

By Monday we were able to drive by the house. What a sight! I went in but Roy was unable to. Our home was knocked off the foundation. The porch door was knocked out; a pole had gone through the black bedroom. There was from six to eight inches of mud, grass, tires, tubs boxes, and straw all over the floor. Our furniture was toppled over in the mud. Our deep-freeze, washer and dryer were also tripped over. Debris was all over the backyard and in the driveway about seven or eight feet high. There was also a boat dock and a trailer home washed in. Our basement was under water for about two or three weeks before we were able to get it pumped out.

After we had seen the damage at the house and blacksmith shop, we went to our daughter's and then our son's to stay. After about ten days we decided we had better rent an apartment because it was too hard on Roy to go from house to another. We found an apartment at the Baronessa, Ricks College apartments for girls. We were only there about four hours when Roy suffered a real had heart attack and was in the hospital for another two weeks. In the meantime, the Red Cross assisted us and the government was busy getting us a trailer home to live in until we could get a home.

Colleen, Renee, Boyd, Kent, and Karen and the older grandchildren salvaged what they could from the mess, the home, and the shop. Colleen had even gone in the basement in her hip boots and got our pressure cooker, our aluminum stepladder, camping equipment, and she had taken the light fixtures down and put them on the front room floor to see if they were worth saving. She came over and got us. When we got back, the demolition crew was tearing down the house so we lost that too. Roy was really appreciative of the six older men from Ogden, Utah, who went into his blacksmith shop and shoveled mud and carried it out in wheelbarrows for two days. He said they were all past 65 years old. They were independent. They wouldn't let you buy their dinner. They brought it with them. They were members of our church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

We appreciate our family. What would we have done without all of them? We thank the Lord that we lost none of our loved ones in the flood. We lost pictures and keepsakes that we can't replace, but we still have our family.

W: Did the government give you any trouble in working our arrangements for your trailer?

C: They were a little slow, but we understand that. There were so many that needed homes, but they did get ours a little quicker than other people because of Roy's condition.

W: Did you have any trouble getting your claim filed with the government?

C: They cut our first claim quite a bit. They let us come back on our second claim and get some things that they cut of the first time. We didn't do too badly.

W: What about the blacksmith shop?

C: Roy was sick when he went back into the shop and he wasn't able to do anything for about two months. Consequently, he didn't see what was gone or damaged badly. The Bureau thought he should have noticed that right away so there are a lot of things that they didn't replace. They said that he would have noticed it, but he couldn't in his condition.

W: Were they able to give you a second claim on the blacksmith shop to replace the things that you lost?

C: Only on some items.

W: Not on everything?

C: We argued about the furnace and a few things that were gone. Roy didn't have to use the furnace in the summer and he didn't realize that it was as bad as it was until later. That was another reason why we filed a second claim. Some of the machinery he's unable to use yet. They couldn't fix it and they wouldn't replace it, so he's out. He says he's too old to fight.

W: Now that you have your home and are in it and Roy is back in his shop, is there anything that you see in retrospect that you would have done differently had you had more time to think it over and plan in advance?

C: I think we would have taken more time with our claim. Roy's one that has never owned anybody and doesn't believe in owing anybody. He didn't want to borrow any money to build a house. When we got the SBA loan, naturally he wanted to pay it back as quickly as he could. He filed a claim to get the money to pay back so we wouldn't owe anybody. I think if we had to do it again, we'd wait and put everything down.

W: It made it rough filing that fast?

C: Roy was sick so I had to do most of it myself, signing up for a trailer house and taking care of him. It was quite an ordeal.

W: As badly as your home was demolished and as quick as they tore it down, you didn't have time for people to help?

C: Not with the home or yard. There wasn't much they could do. The demolition crew took care of the house and the yard. They cleaned up what they could of the backyard. There were a few members that came in one morning with wheelbarrows and took some debris out.

W: Could you describe your neighborhood as it was when you first saw it? What has happened since then?

C: We had the post office on the east of us and the water went right through their building and took the mail and the mail carts out and put it all in our driveway. The whole side of our street looked like it had been the old channel of the river. All of the houses were off their foundations and all but two had to be demolished.

W: So you have a complete new street?

C: We have all new houses except one, but I think they will rebuild soon.

W: Does it really seem like your old neighborhood and home to you?

C: Yes. We don't have any new neighbors and it's good to be back home again. Some people asked us why we didn't move on the hill. The hill wasn't home to us, we wanted to be home again.

W: Did it seem necessary to hang onto something that was tangible?

C: Yes.

W: Could you tell us some of the experiences that you had in going through this disaster?

C: When we were staying with Renee in the day and with Boyd in the night, Roy was walking back and forth and it was a little hard on him in his condition. We got the apartment up at the Baronessa. We had only been in it four hours we when suffered his heart attack. It was a blood clot that went through his heart and his pulse went down to 26. They all thought that they were going to lose him. But with a lot of good help, his life was spared.

W: How did you hold under all of this?

C: I kept going. Roy went back to the apartment after the heart attack and after being released from the hospital. I had to go down and does all the work with the government trying to get the trailer home set up. After that, I had to see about filing the claims.

W: You didn't have time to feel sorry for yourself with all you had to do?

C: No, I had to keep on the go.

W: Did the church help you out at this time?

C: No, we didn't ask for any help. We have always been quite independent. Outside of the fellows that helped inside the shop, we didn't ask the church for anything; although we knew that they would have helped us if we would have asked. The bishop would have been the first one here if we had needed help.

W: Was there any looting in your neighborhood?

C: No. When Boyd came over one morning, a day or two after the flood, he saw a Negro coming out of the house, but he wasn't carrying anything. I guess he was looking around. Maybe he was looking for something or maybe he was just seeing what had happened. We didn't know.

W: How did you feel about the security?

C: I think that it was excellent. It saved a lot of people from losing a lot of things.

W: You weren't able to salvage anything out of your home?

C: No, all the electrical appliances were all shot because the motors had so much mud in them. The television was tipped over and the tubes were broken out. We had to break all the drawers open to get what we could salvage, like pillow cases, sheets and linens.

W: It didn't leave much to go on?

C: Nothing. We did save the silverware, the china and some cooking utensils. We could wash them and there would be no stain.

W: Did you support the building of the dam?

C: Yes, we thought it was needed and we still do. If they want to rebuild it we would be for it because we need the water. I'm sure they will do a better job of it this time. Some people asked us why we built back here if we thought they were going to rebuild the dam. I don't think it would ever flood twice in our lifetime.

W: Do you think the people in your area gained a better testimony of the gospel or do you think the flood had anything to do with their church feelings?

C: I'm sure it has. I know one lady that the destruction of her home helped because it gave her something to do. Before she was quite down with her health but since the flood, she got a new home and it gave her something to look forward to, redecorating and fixing it up. She has something to live for. It definitely has helped her.

W: Does your family feel the flood has been a blessing to the family by pulling them together, or has it pulled them apart?

C: We have always been a close family. Our family has always lived close around us. I don't think it has made us any closer, only we do appreciate what they did for us.

W: Do you feel that it has changed your life?

C: I don't believe so. I work as hard now as I did before the flood. Perhaps that's one way the Lord has of testing our faith, our honesty, and our endurance.

W: Thank you, Mrs. Cole.