

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

**William Ard – Life during the
Teton Flood**

By William Ard

August 23, 1997

Box 5 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Alyn B. Andrus

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin—April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Alyn B. Andrus: Mr. Ard, would you please spell your name?

William Ard: William Ard.

AA: What is your birth date and where were you born?

WA: November 56, 1903. I was born in Kansas, Ellsmore.

AA: Ellsmore, Kansas. Do you have a family?

WA: At home, yes. We raised nine children.

AA: Are any of those children living with you now?

WA: No. They are all out on their own.

AA: I suppose they are all married and have families of their own?

WA: Yes, all of them.

AA: What is your current address?

WA: Same, 137 East 1st South.

AA: Okay.

WAA: I've been here for about twelve years, I think.

AA: At this address?

WA: Yes.

AA: So this was your address when the flood came?

WA: That's right.

AA: Did you own your home before the flood?

WA: Yes.

AA: Would you mind explaining your feelings about the construction of the Teton Dam, that is, did you oppose it or support it, or did you have any feelings one way or the other?

WA: Well, I thought it would be a good thing for the country if they would get that dam built so it would hold and keep the flood from coming down each spring when they had a heavy runoff and snow. I was water master on this canal during the time and I seen a lot

of water go down the river that could have been used instead of stored. I thought it would be a good thing.

AA: What canal were you water master of?

MA: Rexburg Irrigation.

AA: How long were you water master on the canal?

WA: Ten years.

AA: I see. Did these floods happen just about every spring?

WA: Well, this high water happens every spring when we have a heavy snow. The last spring I was on there, I believe that is about the highest water I ever saw. That was '66. I think it was, not '66 but '76, '75.

AA: So you were glad to see the dam going in?

WA: Yes, I was. I thought it would be a benefit to the country.

AA: Now, did you have a premonition of the Teton disaster, did you feel like something bad was going to happen before the dam broke?

WA: No, I didn't. They had it on the radio in a day or two that the dam was going to fill and I was thinking about going up and seeing that water from over the spillway. It'd been kind of interesting. It broke out before it happened.

AA: I want you to tell now about how you were the day that the dam broke and what happened to you after it broke. As you tell your story, you go into as much detail as you'd like to.

WA: My wife and I was here. I was just out in the yard working. We'd been out in the yard all morning, I guess. She came in and heard the news on the radio and she went back out and told me. I says, "Well, I guess, the best things we'd better do is get out of here." So I got in the camper and drove it out and she got in the car and drove it out and come and got me. We never took anything at the tie. We come back and got some food and some water. Course, we had stuff in the camper to live on for a day or two anyway. We went up on the hill in front of the college there on the hill, set there and watched the flood. You couldn't see much of it from there but we could see it when it come through town. I know I could look through the street down below us here, clear through to the Teton River. I could see the buildings and trailer houses just float through there like big boats on a sea. It was quite a sight, I thought. Nobody around. After the water got here in town, you could see cars and things moving clear up across the streets sideways and one thing and another. Everybody around, as I looked down west where the water was gong out of town. The water wasn't so deep down there along by the railroad track,

people were driving around down in the water in cars in town. I guess after it got a little deeper why they had to get out, but that's all about I saw of it.

AA: Did you have any idea how deep it would get here around your home?

WA: I told my wife I didn't think it would get up in our house. That flood we had here a few years ago, I wasn't living here then, it was in '63 I think it was. They said it got just here to back of the lot and down there to the back of the lot it was about four feet deep due to the flood. But here in the house it got just a little less than a foot on the floor here. The basement was full. Course we never got anything out, we never tried to. I didn't think it would be enough water. They said there would be a foot of water on the main street in Rexburg. I thought, well, if that's all it is why it won't get this big. But before I went out, I guess somebody else parked out here, one of the Petersons. I think it was Matt. I told him about it and I said, "You better get out of here. There's a lot of water in that dam and it could get ten foot deep here," just to scare him and that's all I said it for, but I didn't think it would be as deep as it was.

AA: Did you see any animals trying to escape the flood waters?

WA: No, I didn't.

AA: Now, where did you and Mrs. Ard stay that first night and then the first few days after the flood?

WA: We stayed in our camper on the hill, up here the first night and then we come down that evening after the flood passed here and saw the house and the mess and then drove back up there and stayed all night. Then we come down again the next day and my oldest son come and he took us to Idaho Falls and we stayed down there all the time, till we got the house cleaned out and the mud out of it. That is about a week we stayed down there, a little better. We got the house cleaned up and the basement emptied, the rugs all out, everything like that we just carried out and put in the back porch, around the front of the lawn or something like that.

AA: Who helped you clean out your house?

WA: My family helped me get the house cleaned up and out and then there were a lot of volunteer workers come around and I think the ones we had here was from Brigham City. They helped clean up the yard and stuff like that.

AA: What was your first reaction when you saw what the flood had done to your home?

WA: Well, I didn't realize it had done as much damage as it did. I thought, maybe we'd save some things, but in the basement we had all our winter clothing down there stored, and had a bedroom down there and it just looked like somebody took a big egg beater and whirled that around and beat it up. I guess the water coming in from all directions

just caused a current in there. There's the two windows on that side and there's one on the east, made kind of a cross current in there.

AA: What did Mrs. Ard say or think when she saw it?

WA: She seemed to think everything was ruined. She took it worse than I did. Course she wasn't very well at the time.

AA: Was that a bad emotional experience for her, do you think?

WA: Yes. Yes, she was sick so it didn't help her any. I think it made her eventually get worse faster.

AA: She's deceased, isn't she?

WA: yes.

AA: Do you feel that maybe brought on her death earlier than otherwise?

WA: It brought it on sooner, I'm sure of that but I can't say that it caused her death.

AA: Yes, so what was the extent of the damage that you suffered as a result of the flood, Bill?

WA: Just all the flood we had stored and the rugs. And we lost all the carpets on the first floor. Everything in the basement was ruined, bedding and everything like that. A lot of our clothes was washed out, we had to put into the laundry down to Rigby and have them cleaned and they came back pretty good. A lot of them we didn't even try to.

AA: Was there any structural damage to the house that you know of?

WA: Not very much to this house. There wasn't very much, just the water being in it and, of course, we had to clean out that room. I had it all insulated in the top and we had to take all that ceiling out and get that insulation off to dry it out. That was the biggest job, course when you like to have to build the partitions back in, it was all ruined and the door.

AA: Your children helped you do that?

WA: No, I had to have it hired and done later.

AA: How soon after the flood were you able to get your basement pumped out.

WA: In about three or four days we had a little pump here about an inch pipe on it and it would pump enough water so finally my brother-in-law brought up one from Boise where he lives. We got that and it was a six-inch pump and was one of these that squeezes up

and down, you know. That just pumped mud and water, both out; that was a good pump. But to have that got it out in a day.

AA: What were some of the most cherished item that you lost in the flood? Can you remember of anyway?

WA: I think the pictures of the family and stuff like that, photographs and pictures we had. They was all stored in the basement and we lost all of them. I saved a few of them, but you can't tell what they are. They're so wrinkled up and corroded now. Cause there was furniture that we threw away too, down there. That was no good. I had an old dresser down there, I know I had chairs and things like that, they just went to pieces.

AA: when you saw the flood waters roll through Rexburg, what did you think about?/

WA: I was surprised anything was left.

AA: did you find it hard to believe the dam could break and let that water out?

WA: Well, yes and no. Anything can break if it's not built right and seems like I didn't feel like that dam would ever break. Everybody said, some of the engineers even said that dam would never hold water, but I thought well, maybe they don't know everything there is to know about it.

AA: Did you see Rexburg the morning after the flood? Did you drive around any throughout the city?

WA: No, I think I just left town. I just drove out the next morning soon as we could get out, about noon anyway. That was on a Sunday and we went down to the Falls and stayed there. Hurried back and forth, I went back and forth every day. I left my wife down there with her daughter.

AA: You have a pretty good idea about what Rexburg looked like then, after the flood?

WA: Yes, I drove around through it in a few days.

AA: I see.

WA: At different times.

AA: What did you think as you saw what the flood had done to the community?

WA: I didn't see how they ever build it back. Some of the houses that you see just torn off their foundations, piled up, didn't look like you could ever build it back. Even the main street was that way, too. Everything was wrecked.

AA: We're a little better than a year after the flood took place now. What do you think about the contrast between Rexburg and Rexburg right after the flood?

WA: It's much better now, but the building is all better and is all new, practically all new buildings in Rexburg. Makes it look a lot better anyway.

AA: Have you been impressed during the year between now and when the flood happened, how fast the people in Rexburg were rebuilding and restoring their buildings?

WA: Yes, I have. I didn't think it could be done that quick. There's a lot of people, even started as soon as they got their place cleaned off, they started to rebuild right while the carpet is still wet. I don't blame them, I would, too.

AA: Now, during cleanup operations, Bill, did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

WA: No, I didn't.

AA: Would you describe any government aid you received immediately after the flood, if you received any, like Red Cross for example?

WA: Yes, we got some things, buckets, and mops and stuff like that from the Red Cross, whatever they had up there. I don't remember what it all was, but we got everything we could, that we needed. We didn't need too much but a lot of things were washed away that we did have outdoors to use, like that.

AA: What are your feelings about the organizations such as the Red Cross and what are your feelings about the government, I think, has been pretty fair with replacing everything, with everyone, everyone that I know of anyway. I think some people tried to put in for more than what they could expect to get, they figured they'd make some money, but I don't think they did. I don't think they did, I don't think the government allowed it. I think they all got about a little more probably than what they lost.

AA: Did you have any dealings with agencies like the Small Business Administration?

WA: No, I didn't.

AA: So, the only part of the government that you dealt with after the flood was the Bureau of Reclamation, is that correct?

WA: That's right.

AA: Now, have you submitted your claim to the Bureau?

WA: Yes.

AA: Has the Bureau honored the claim as you submitted it?

WA: Well, they cut me down a little, but not too much.

AA: So you've already been paid by the Bureau?

WA: Yes.

AA: Okay. Would you say then, that you're generally satisfied with what the Bureau gave you?

WA: Yes, I think I am.

AA: Did you have any particular problems with the Bureau as they were processing your claim, that you'd like to talk about?

WA: Well, they're awfully slow about processing their claims, but I guess they have to. It takes three or four men to look over each one of them claims. It has to go through, I think, about six of them. It all takes time, they are awfully slow, I will say that, getting their work done. I guess it's just like any other government busyness, they never hurry.

AA: Did you have anything to do with the state and local authorities or law enforcement officers during cleanup operations?

WA: No.

AA: You must have observed the law enforcement officers in action, how would you evaluate the job that they did?

WA: I think they did a good job. The only contact I had with them was the state police going back and forth between here and the Falls and they was looking over the incoming traffic pretty close and seeing what was going on there. Keep things from being stolen and hauled out, which they did catch a lot of things like that. Stopped so many people from coming in, you know, everybody was trying to come in and see what the flood has done. The country would have just filled up and there wouldn't have been any room for anybody if they'd let them in. So I think they done a good job. It worked hardship on a person when he's had to go back and forth to get here in the morning, you'd have to stand there in lines sometimes while they checked your license and seen where you was from, like that, it takes sometimes a half an hour.

AA: Now, you mentioned that you had some volunteers help you; these volunteers were from Brigham City, Utah.

WA: They were from the LDS church.

AA: Were you satisfied with the work that they gave?

WA: I sure was, they did very good work.

AA: Were you impressed by the number of volunteers who came into the area and by the work that they did?

WA: I sure was. I didn't think they could ever get that many people in here and clean up the city and the resident area as quick as they did. I don't know what they did. I don't know what happened. Seemed like everyone that come in was really willing to work.

AA: Did you receive any help from any other religious organizations such as Interfaith or the Mennonites?

WA: No, I never did have anything to do with them. I got some groceries from the LDS church once or twice, that's all I ever got.

AA: Now, Bill, do you feel that the flood was diving punishment or a man-made disaster?

WA: Well, I think it was a man-made disaster, that's all, the only way I can say it.

AA: All right, do you feel that God may have intervened to save lives?

WA: I think he did, yes, He did, cause if it would have happened at night, half the people would have been drowned, if it had happened in the night. When out in the daytime, it wasn't too bad, we didn't lose too many lives, twelve or fourteen, something like that, I don't know which it was.

AA: Do you feel like the dam should be rebuilt?

WA: If they could build it solid enough, it would be a good thing. I think sometime they will.

AA: If they rebuilt it like it should be built, would you be willing to live on the flood plain, below the dam?

WA: Well, if they rebuilt it like it should be built, I just as soon live here as anywhere else.

AA: How has the flood changed your life, Bill, and the life of this community, as you see it?

WA: I don't know, I don't get around to visit with people very much, but it's changed, everything has changed. People are different than they used to be, I think. They seem to want to help each other more, I think, than they used to. Maybe it's just as my idea.

AA: Do you think the flood changed your life personally?

WA: I think it did, yes. I look at things a lot different now than I used to.

AA: Do you think it changed your life for the better?

WA: Well, I can't say that.

AA: I see. Is there anything else now that you'd like to say before we end the interview?

WA: I can't think of anything.

AA: I want to thank you for the time that you've given and as I've mentioned to you earlier, copies of this interview will be sent to the Utah State University Library, Ricks College Library, and the Library of the Historical Society in Boise, and a copy of it will be sent to you for your own personal use.

WA: Okay.