

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

William P. Carter – Life during the
Teton Flood

By William P. Carter

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Box 5 Folder 31

Oral Interview conducted by Larry Buckle

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I am Larry Buckle. Today April 19, 1977 I am going to interview William P. Carter. The general topic will be the Teton Dam disaster.

Mr. Carter was born in Rexburg, Idaho; he has lived her off and on for about thirty years. His father was born in Quebec, Canada, his mother in Rexburg, Idaho. His occupation is working for Utah Power and Light.

LB: Mr. Carter, where were you when you first heard about the dam break?

WC: I was fishing with a friend at the worm water fish hatchery when we heard it on the car radio. It was 11:55 and Ted Ellis was saying that the dam was going out.

What were your thoughts at this time; well our first thoughts were of disbelief, but the first thing we said I don'tk now if it was me or my neighbor was should we go home or should we go on fishing but it only took us a few seconds and we decided we should be going home.

LB: did you go straight home or did you have to take alternate routes?

WC: We started into Aston as fast as we safely could. Along the route we ran into another fellow from this area, we had been on a priesthood outing. We took the route through the Drummond Teton Basin and then we come that route down into Rexburg area. And then we went around to the Moody road by passing all the river routes in case some of the bridges had been washed out.

LB: Did you beat the water here to Rexburg?

WC: Yes, we got to Rexburg and stopped at the land bank where my neighbor works and put the typewriters on the counters expecting a couple feet of water and disconnected the power. He then took me to my office which is Utah Power and Light and I went in and took the files from my desk and pout them on top again expecting a couple feet of water. Then I went out side and turned off the power and got my company truck and at that time I called my wife so she would not worry about me. I then went to the gas station and filled the tank with gas and then went home. At that time I found everyone to be safe and there wasn't much I could do, the water wasn't here yet, of course all this time we were listening to the KRXX radio station and they were very excited and they had reason to be excited. At this point I might say I think they did an excellent job in reporting the facts under the circumstances in telling everyone to get out. At this time when I thought everyone to be safe I got some gas cans and I went down and had them filled and also went down to my father's house to get some emergence supplies. I then went home and waited for the flood to come.

LB: When it came could you tell what it looked like?

WC: we live just to the north of the hospital on the hill and we did have some insight into the waters as coming through the fields, the wife asked me once if we should bank

up the basement doors. And I told her there was no fear, the water would never get this high. But she did do so anyway, she piled up a couple feet of dirt and plastic around it. I thought at this time it was a little foolhardy because there was no danger of the water getting this high. From the time we got home to the time that water actually got to our place was about two hours. We climbed on top of our house and watched it through binoculars and with our eye coming through the field just to the north of us. There was a dust cloud in front of it and there was debris in front of it. It was kind of hard to comprehend that it was really happening. We were standing up there watching the water coming closer in a distance of about half a mile to the north a trailer house went floating by and we said, "Oh look there went so and so's trailer" and soon after here come a house, there went Johnson's house. You couldn't hardly believe all this and the horse come running up the fields and up past the High School and of course they were excited and running. Then the state police come telling everyone to move and there was still some stragglers hanging back there to the very end and then the state police got after them and got them back up the hill, at this time everyone in the neighborhood had moved back up the hill to. And as the water moved in the cattle was swimming with them and they swam right into our neighbor's yard one of them was standing on his front step with only his head above the water and some of the rest were swimming and we kept thinking the poor critters are going to be drowned yet they had swayed quite a ways but they did stay where they were and the water moved right up to our back yard. It moved right up into our raspberries and part of our garden at this time. I started to think the wife wasn't so foolhardy in banking up the basement doors and she started banking up some more but the water stabilized there for five or ten minutes and then it started going down slowly. At this time the cows started coming into the higher ground, there was a pig that was washed in. He found a home in our garden. It had a lot of good fresh food. As the water came in we took pictures with all the film we had. We had a good vantage point and we watched our neighbors home just below us three or three of them washed away one of them belonged to Neva Nuton. It washed off its foundation and she's just a little north and east of Smith Park and this is the home that washed through Smith Park and this is the home that ended up in professional plaza parking lot. There was one or two others in that same area that it tried to wash away. It washed up against trees and stopped at that point.

LB: What about the place where you work, Utah Power and Light?

WC: AS soon as the water started to go down I ventured down there. There was probably still a couple feet of water on Main Street. It was at least as deep as the doors on the truck. I went straight to my office. The back door had been broken in and there were some small trees in the hallways. I went inside and there was the huge safe. It was four or four and a half feet high maybe three feet across the front. It had floated out and down the street. The partitions had all been broken out and the desks were all turned upside down and all of the files had been dumped and it was a real mess with all the water and mud. There wasn't much I could do at that time so I left that and went on checking some other things. I went down to my parent's place. They live just west of Rexburg on K Street and I could see that water had entered their apartment by about six inches. All of the doors and windows held so all there was a lot of mud and dirt. I then went home on the way I stopped at one of the stores where my son worked. It had a lot of bad damage

there but we did get some emergency lights not knowing what was ahead of us. At that time I was concerned with the electricity in town because that is my job. I did check into where they did set up temporary headquarters and that was up at the Army reserve up near Ricks College.

LB: Getting back to the flood itself what did the water look like? Was it a wall or wave, how high was it?

RC: Well, it was a wall, as it came to our street. I can't really remember how high it was. It seemed as soon as it hit the high school area instead of being like a wall it was more like the tide coming in. I know there was a wall when it was back to the north a little farther but I really can't remember a wall as it got closer.

LB: In some place there was a lot of logs and debris being churned in front of the water was that here?

RC: You could see it back to the north but by our place there wasn't very much I think it was mostly in the main channel which more or less followed the Teton River and I guess it did come into town. But by our house there was only straw twigs, manor and thing of that nature since we were of the main channel.

LB: At this time how bad did you think the down was hurt?

WC: Well it was really unbelievable to see the amount of damage there was but the damage was al to worse than it looked at the time. The floors had caved in and the windows, a quick inspection down Main Street didn't show this. Our concern was mostly for members of our family who lived directly in the path of the flood, so in a round about method we went up to Teton and found the wife's family Mr. and Mrs. Milton Wilding and my brothers house was washed clean. They didn't even find any part of their house for three weeks.

LB: After it got dark what was it like, there must have been a lot of animal around?

RC: There were a few cattle around. I don't know what happened to them because I did have to go to look into other matters. The animals around our area didn't' stay round very long. We stayed here in our home that first night. We didn't have any electricity but the people across the street did, also the hospital had power. The next day we got power.

LB: How did you let your friends and relatives know you were alright?

RC: One day I went u pt he College and the Air Force was there with messages and they would send messages by I think it was called the marze system.

LB: what was the relief effort like?

RC: People got fed and a place to sleep up at the college. Sunday morning at about 6:30 I went up to the college and had breakfast with some of our people, they had eggs and bread and butter. Ricks College was the center of activity you could get anything there from Red Cross and the church anything from temple garments to work boots.

LB: Thinking back on the flood area you mad at the people who built the dam or just what?

RC: No I never felt upset or blamed any of the construction people or the people who designed the dam. I felt that from the time the dam was started I was not in favor of it. Maybe for my own selfish reasons. But this was a common thought after the dam went out. They dammed up stream in a beautiful canyon, we would float down it several times a year. I felt the reasons for the dam really went good ones. There were cheaper ways to control flood and I feel it was not the government's position to spend fifty million dollars to control a few floods. Also when the people bought the land they knew that they were in a flood plain.

LB: So are you now opposed to the dam being rebuilt?

RC: Well, I think so now you may wonder why I am not definite. I am not in favor of it being rebuilt at this time but maybe someone could convince me otherwise, but I think that there are cheaper ways to control floods. I feel and it's been proven that that place was not a good place to build a dam. It could be designed to be safe but I would not sleep easy if I lived in the flood plain. I am sure that if they did rebuild the dam they would take a lot more safe guards.

LB: Now that the towns are starting to rebuild do you think that the towns will be helped by the flood or do you think that they will never recover?

RC: I think that Rexburg will recover in fact I feel that Rexburg is recover in fact I think it will expand faster than it would have without a flood. It forced people to decide to expand their businesses or start new ones. Also new people came in and saw the business opportunities. I think Rexburg is greatly helped by the flood and Sugar City will be almost a all new town and it should be a very pretty town.

LB: Now is there anything that is on your mind that you would like to say?

RC: Yes. Being with Utah Power and Light I felt out people did a great job that night of the flood. We had people up here from Shelly. By Sunday we had five helicopters in here and were starting to look over the damage. By Monday one third of the companies forces were in the area. It looked like there was a crew on every corner in town. The way the men worked and the hard ships they were under, they had to travel back and forth to the falls to sleep. The man really put forth some fine work.

LB: Was there a lot of theft after the flood.

RC: I did not see any but I did hear that the police did get some that stole some things from the jewelry store. It was very hard to get in and out of town, the state police had road blocks and in order to get anything out of town you had to have a written statement form the sheriff.

LB: The Church played a big role in this. What role did your Bishop and ward play?

RC: the first person I ran into when I went up to the Army Reserve was my Bishop. He had a ward roster and was trying to account for all the members at that time he had all but one or two they were found to be ok. The Bishop's house was totaled. He did play his role as farther of the ward very well. Our Bishop is Merl Jepson. Our ward building was a new building. We had only met in it two times. After the water had gone down we used the building as one of the places to feed people and also to hand out goods they served three meals a day. The church was right in the path of the flood however the only damage was from water seeping under the doors. So the only thing that was needed was new carpets. It was a real miracle that the church was not badly damaged when everything around it was. Also our Elder President was taking head count. His name is Lewis Hart.

LB: Did Pres. Kimball give the people the people a big lift?

RC: He did. He told that they didn't have to do anything to deserve what happened, it was just a man made thing that happened just like thing in nature you don't have to bad to have things happen. In fact they really are blessed people to have it happen when it did, on a Saturday, a day with good weather also because of the number of people that were killed so few. I though that there would be hundreds of people killed.

LB: How long did it take your ward to get back to normal?

RC: We go our meetings back to normal in three to four weeks but on a whole we are till not back to normal.

LB: Did you know any of the people that were killed?

RC: One of the men that had been working with our company had been working late at night and he dropped a gun and it shot him in the leg. He bled to death a few seconds. That's the only one that I knew personally.

LB: How bad were the schools hurt?

RC: Not as bad as you might think. I know that the Adams Grade School that is down the street from us took all summer to get back into shape. School was late in starting but they seem to be in good shape now. One funny note in a sad way there was only one portion of the High School that was not damaged in the flood. So they did move a lot of their records up there. Shortly after that a truck coming down Millholard drive. It ran

through the wall of the school and set off the fire system, and all the records got flooded anyway.

LB: How bad was your mother-in-law's place in Sugar City?

RC: It was a total loss. The floors were caving in and everything was full of mud. We ended up taking everything to the dump. You just couldn't get the mud out.

Everything in my office was a total loss. Every once in a while, while we were cleaning out my office, we would find a fish that had suffocated in the mud.

LB: Right along with fish how bad was the fishing hurt in the area?

RC: Well people talk about how all of the vegetation was washed away. I understand that the fish are starting to come back. Where the lake was, there is only a bunch of little lakes with little dams in it. Also to float down the river is very hazardous and it is recommended not to try it. I'm sure the fishing will come back. One problem is that the river was a clean river. You could catch white fish and ever once in a while a sucker. But with all of these small lakes with worm water the trash fish may become a problem unless the water could wash out the small dams and get the water to move fast.

Thank you very much Mr. Carter. This tape will be placed in the Ricks College for use by future researchers. This tape has been done by Larry Buckle.