

Voices From the Past

# TETON FLOOD & RECOVERY

By W. Keith Walker

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## Tape #180

Oral Interview conducted by Louis Clements

Transcribed by Louis Clements      January 2003

Brigham Young University- Idaho

(Present at this interview were Keith Walker, Doyle Walker, and Louis Clements.)

Clements: Tell us in your words the events of the Teton Flood and your part from the time you first heard of the problem at the dam through the recovery?

Walker: On June the 5<sup>th</sup>, it was a beautiful morning, one of those really pretty ones that make you feel happy to be alive, and everything was going along all right. I had just finished cleaning out some corrals up where the beef cattle were and we had turned them all out to pasture. We were getting the cattle ready to move up to Henry's Lake. I had been up there for two or three hours with one of my boys, Kim, when my older boy came riding up the road on the motorcycle.

He said, "Hey, Dad, the Sheriff's department is trying to get hold of you. They said there is a problem of some kind up at the dam and they thought you ought to be aware of it."

I said, "What did they say the problem was?"

He said, "I don't know. They were just trying to reach you."

About this time, here came my father riding up the road in his pickup. Sheriff Ford Smith had called him.

My father said, "They said that it was leaking, the dam's leaking. Where you're Chairman of the County Commissioners, I think that you'd better go take a look at it."

I shut off the tractor I was digging post holes with and jumped over the pole fence. I told Dad to slide over so I could drive. Kim went with us.

We backed out and went up the road about as fast as we could drive. That was a little better than the speed limit. As quick as we got on the highway, we turned the radio on to hear if there was any news.

By the time we got to Teton, the announcer said that the dam was going, that it had broken. The dam wasn't going to hold as the water was really coming out of it. I told my father, "With all the decisions that are going to have to be made, I'd better see for myself, now that we are this close, just how bad things are." So we just kept the pickup floor boarded and went straight on up.

When we got there we didn't even stop. We just pulled into the parking area by the office building. We could see hunks of dirt coming out of the face of the dam about the size of the old 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Ward church house. My first felling was that if it was starting to seep or break, if the dam could hold until the pressure was relieved a little bit, we might be all right. But when I saw that wall of water and those big hunks of dirt and earth coming out of the dam, I knew there was nothing to restrict any water. It just dumped the whole thing all at once. I didn't know if we could make it back to the bridge across the Teton River down by Teton before the water got there.

By the time we got back out on the highway the radio had told of the beautiful sight and people were coming from every direction up the road to see it. They were ignoring warnings to get out. We really had a problem because of all the traffic heading back that way.

By the time we got down as far as Sugar City the state police officers were starting to run from door-to-door and down the side roads to evacuate people and get them out.

Having experience in the Commissioners position for about four years, I knew what my decision making responsibilities would be so I came straight on down the road.

When we got down to the Rogers Brothers corner, Doyle Walker and his wife were there directing traffic. I stopped long enough to tell Doyle not to let anybody go on up the road. The state police were trying to evacuate everyone from the Valley. I told him just to turn people around and head them back.

I didn't even stop at my house when I came by. I went straight over and jumped out of Dad's pickup at his place and into my own. I told my son, Kim, to run back over and tell his mother to get all the kids, get in the car, and get up on the hill by the college. They were to stay there until she heard from me.

I told dad, "Just get Mother and don't worry about a thing. And whatever you do, don't turn those daggoned cows out on the highway." There were about 460 head of them in the corrals near the highway.

I went straight to the courthouse. Ronnie Moss, our Civil Defense Director, had heard about the dam break and was there with Kent Marlor. That pleased me a great deal because now I was not all alone. I told Ronnie to turn the fire sirens on in Rexburg and Sugar City and just to let them run until the power was gone.

I told him that we really needed to know just how much time we had for our evacuation because we were concerned about all the people on the lower streets here in Rexburg. Ronnie said he had some ham radio friends who had heard about the flood. They were flying into the airport. When he called them on his radio, they said that they were just about ready to come in for a landing. Ronnie asked them if they could take us up over the area to see how far the waters had come and how bad the flood was. We needed to see if it was starting to spread out and lose some of its velocity and force.

The pilot said, "You, bet. If you can be there when we touch down, we'll just turn right around and take off."

I had told Sheriff Ford Smith that according to the law he had authority over the state police, over the city police, and over everyone else. It was a great load to put on his shoulders.

Dell Klingler, another Commissioner, showed up at that time. I told Dell to handle things at the courthouse while we were gone.

A kid from search and rescue from Idaho Falls, who had heard about the flood on his radio, was sitting out in front of the Sheriff's department with a four-wheel drive unit. He told us that he would get us to the airport. Ronnie grabbed a radio so we could communicate with Kent and tell him what to do. That was about as wild a ride as we ever had. When we went around the corner by Boise Cascade we went sideways on all four tires. He had his sirens going. I told him we were not going to be any good to anybody if we didn't get there. He said not to worry.

When we got to the airport the plane was just landing. We went right onto the runway in the Ram Charger. The plane didn't even finish taxiing to a stop. Two guys in the plane just opened a door on one side and jumped out and we jumped in the other side. The plane turned around and took off.

I kept hoping that as big as the valley was, even with that much pressure coming, that the water would spread out and lose its force. When we flew over the wall of water, it was just going over the roof of the Wilford Church. This building was one of the old churches.

I radioed back to Kent and told him that it was worse than I thought it was going to be. As near as I could tell the water looked about thirty feet deep and from three to four miles wide. We could see horses and other animals vainly trying to outrun it. The water was moving too fast.

When it hit ditch banks and roadways, it went just that much higher in the air. There were trailer houses, homes, and everything floating in the water. We circled right around and headed back. I told Ronnie we had to get people out of Rexburg as well as those that were coming out of the Valley.

We circled around and started back. We saw a pickup sitting on one of the roads that run north and south with two fellows standing by the side of it. We came down very low with the plane and waved the wings at them and tried to motion for them to get the heck out of there. The wall of water that was coming wasn't over a hundred and fifty yards from them. They seemed to be frozen. They were just sitting there. One was leaning against the pickup and the other was standing out in front.

The wall didn't really look like water; it had so much dirt and dust in it. It looked like a big cloud of dust, like a terrific wind storm. I have a feeling that they were the two fellows who came from the Parker area to help some of their family get out, whom we lost during the flood.

We came right straight back to Rexburg. When we lit at the airstrip there were a great number of people standing around and leaning against the buildings. When Eldon Hart came running up I told him to get his wife and the rest of the help that he had there, to shut his doors, and hope for the best, because in just a little while we were going to have water here that he wouldn't believe.

One bystander said, "Don't tell me that, Keith. We've had floods before. You won't even see any water here."

I told him, "Take my word for it; this place is going to be so deep under water, you won't know what to do."

We jumped into an outfit and went back to the courthouse. Leo Smith, the other commissioner, had shown up while we were gone, having heard about the flood on the radio. Hauling cattle up to Henry's Lake, he had been told that he couldn't take his cattle on through because we'd shut all the traffic off to the north.

When I was coming into town before there was so much traffic I just went up the other lane. When I got to the big bridge up here, the new one they just put in by the Cal Ranch Store, I'll bet you there must have been a hundred and fifty people standing on that bridge. They were looking up stream and downstream. There were a couple of Sheriff's deputies there but they were not stopping traffic. I jumped out of the pickup and Bishops don't use that kind of language, but, it was only about ten words and there wasn't anybody left there in about two minutes. They just disappeared.

At the next intersection, where the stop light was, there was a great big cattle truck loaded with cattle headed up into Montana or someplace. A city policeman was directing traffic. The driver was arguing with the policeman and telling him, "Just let me go. I can get through before the water comes."

I just stopped long enough to tell the policeman that his job was not to argue with anybody. His job was to tell them what to do. I told the guy in the truck to take his load of cattle up on the hill and to stay up there or to turn around and get back down to Idaho Falls or someplace, but he wasn't going through here.

When I got back to the courthouse from the plane ride, they had moved everybody out of there and had gone up on the hill to the Army reserve building near the college. They had set up the county headquarters there. By that time we had some of the National Guard radio equipment set up so we could get some kind of communication out. The Civil Defense had evacuated the first two streets from the north edge of town. They had the city police and the state police working with us in that area along with a lot of volunteers.

The volunteers were going from house to house making sure that everybody was out. As quickly as they got through with one street they moved to the next one.

By that time one could see the water coming from the top of the hill. We climbed up on the roof of the armory building and watched it. As I said, "It looked like a great big cloud of dirt coming. In only a few minutes it was all over the whole area. Some of the big white houses and stuff that came from over above Smith Park floated on down Main Street. Logs, cattle, and everything floated by."

Our biggest problem was the fear that we didn't have everyone out of the Valley. Out in the Salem area and places like that, fellows were out fixing fence and repairing their ditches quite a ways from their houses. Often times out there one has no radio or anything else and is not aware of what is going on. So we had quite a fear about not having everybody out of the flood.

President of the College, Henry Eyring, came over and said, "Anything you need, it's yours; just ask for it."

We told him we had an awful lot of people with no place to stay. He said the college would start working right now to find a place for everybody by night. He also said that they would set things up in the cafeteria where they would have food to eat.

"It wasn't until later but I think that you (to Doyle Walker) had about 14,000 in there, didn't you Doyle?"

Doyle Walker: "Pretty close to that."

Keith Walker: When they started quoting the ones that they were feeding it jumped up a lot more than that. I know some of those figures they gave out to start with were 36000 meals that they put out in one day or something like that. There were a great number of us who didn't go through the cafeteria because of the tremendous responsibilities we had. There was pressure on us so strong that we couldn't get loose to do that.

They just kept bringing in sandwiches and things and we just kept going steady. I remember the first night; by the time it got dark we had word back that they had everybody that was up there a place to stay. They had also fed them supper, which is something. It is some kind of a feat that you can't even imagine anyway, that many people.

Blaine Bake was working with us, with our paramedics and our ambulance service, to coordinate with the hospital. Because of all the dirt, filth, and the barnyards along with the dead animals that were coming through, they felt we needed to inoculate everybody for Tetanus and other things on the National Guard radio we tried to get Boise to send medicine to give to the people who had been in the flood area. We were having a terrible time with them. I don't know who the individual was that we were working with over there, but he wouldn't give permission for that.

He said, "No, way. Things aren't so bad that you have to start inoculating people for that."

That upset people a lot and we lost a lot of time.

Where the water had gone back up the water system in Rexburg, there was no water. I was trying to remember how many thousands of gallons of Clorox that we got hold of to flush all the systems out. Milk tanker units came bringing water in from other areas. We had isolated situations like babies who were on goat's milk and couldn't have anything else. We had to find goat's milk. That might not seem like a very serious thing compared to everything else but to the individuals it was serious. Believe it or not, we found goat's milk.

I think it was about 12:30 a.m. that night that we finally got loose for a few minutes. I don't remember what room Kent took us to. I think it was in the boys' dormitory. I was in my work clothes, not the greatest in the world because I had been working in the corral. The fellows working with me must have thought that they were not to good either because they had another set of clothes for me when I was ready to go back to work in the morning.

I think by the time we quit that night we estimated there were one hundred and fifty-eight people we couldn't account for. At the time with all the confusion and everything else that was going on, it didn't occur to us that possibly some of them out in the Salem area would head out to Egin Bench because it was closer and higher ground than coming back this way. We had no communications with St. Anthony or anybody else at this time.

All the phone lines, power lines, and everything else were gone. In fact, I can remember looking out over the valley that night and having a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. There wasn't a light anyplace out there. It was just as black as the inside of a closet. It was a kind of different feeling to have.

I remember finally that I rolled over on the cot they had there. It seemed I barely shut my eyes when I was awakened. We were supposed to meet with General Shore at 3:00 a.m. that morning to go out in one of the National Guard helicopters that had finally arrived. We had really tried hard to get them in here because we knew that was the only way we could get to some people out in the flood. We called and called and called. I don't know what the problem was, what the hang up was, but they were supposed to be coming from mountain Home Air Force Base. We had asked for them about 12:00 or 12:30. They didn't get here until just time to make one run before it got dark. Why it took that long to get those choppers over here I will never know unless it was just red tape and making sure that things were serious enough that they would have authorization to expend that kind of money.

On that only trip they made before it got dark. They picked up one boy. Two boys had been fishing up the river in the canyon below the dam. One of them, of course, went on down with the water. The other one did too, but he got hold of a big tree, strong enough to stand up to the water. When they flew over it, they found him up in the top of the tree. He had a punctured lung. They got him up out of there and brought him back into the hospital and he recovered. I think that they picked up one or two other individuals on the tops of houses and places like that.

Anyway, we had made arrangements with General Shore that at first light we would go over the area in one of the choppers to see just exactly how bad things were.

So at 3:00 a.m. we had to be back over to our headquarters. We met with him and waited for the personnel to service the helicopter and check it out. It seemed like quite a bit of time before we took off.

Just as it was starting to get light, General Shore, Del, Leo, and I, and President Ricks (Mark Ricks), our Regional Representative, flew over the area out through Sugar City and Salem. It was first thought that Teton City was gone, but by some miracle, Teton sits on high enough ground that the water did not even touch it but went to the north. Teton was completely free of it. Anyway, when we went over the area we couldn't see an earthly thing alive down there. Although all the pressure of the water was gone there were still places where the water was two or three feet deep or deeper in big pools. Where houses had been, some places we could see just a cement foundation full of water, like a swimming pool. No trees, no out buildings, no fences, nothing. It was the most desolate looking sight one could ever see. It made us sick to our stomachs.

We circled clear out over the whole area and came back. President Kimball (President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), Brother Packer, the president of the Relief Society, Barbara Smith, and the Presiding Bishop had all arrived in Rexburg. They had a meeting scheduled at 12:30 p.m. in the field house to speak to the people.

I felt it was just not worth it. Why not just pack up and go South and start over again someplace. I was really even afraid to share with the people what had happened out there because everything they had worked for all their lives and slaved so hard for was gone. There just wasn't anything there anymore. Even my own home, my own area, places where I was raised and everything were gone. I couldn't even find them flying over the top of them, looking at them. There were very few items still there.

The flood victims met in the Hart Field House. I can remember meeting with the Presiding Bishop and Barbara Smith for a few minutes. They came over to our command headquarters. Walking back down the street and crossing over to the field house, Sister Smith saw a young mother lying in the grass. She had a little baby lying on her stomach and she was sound asleep. Sister Smith took one look at her and just broke out and cried.

When we went in they had me conduct the meeting and introduce them speakers...I spoke a few minutes. We didn't have too many there because of the confusion. Some hadn't gotten to bed until 12:00 a.m. A lot probably were not aware of the meeting because we had people scattered all over in every housing complex that didn't get wet. Those that were there just sat with a kind of glazed look in their eyes and a stunned appearance.

The next thing we put into practice was the training and all the years of work we had had in leadership positions and the correlation system of the Church. We started to have what we called a correlation meeting at 6:00 every morning.

People had shown up as early as Sunday wanting to help. Hugh Eyerland had come in and asked, "Where can I help and what do you need?"

I asked him who he was and what he had. He told me that he was the ramrod for Burgraff Construction. I asked him what kind of equipment he had. He said he had anything we needed. I asked him where it was. He said half of it was in St. Anthony and the other half was down to Rigby. I said that was great.

We had determined from the helicopter that we had one bridge intact, the old steel bridge on the river road going to Meyers Brothers. The overpass on 191 was gone,

washed right out, and the bridge was gone there. But the old steel bridge that was built like the railroad bridges was still intact. It was the only one we had. The roads were washed out badly on both sides of it.

Hugh said he would bring every piece of equipment he could get, and he did. They started and ran twenty-four hours. They never shut them down. They just fueled them and kept them going.

They started building the road north of town. Before they could get to where the roads were all washed out and the big holes were they had to clear log jams out of the town roads. Coming out towards the river bridge, the road was out on both sides. They couldn't even get tow hat was left of the bridge. The river was filled with houses and debris so badly between the girders of the bridge that the water wasn't going under. It was going around both sides. They had to clear a pathway with the loaders and dozers so they could start hauling gravel and material.

We first started with two 9-88 cat loaders with seven and a half yard buckets. The only county owned pit (gravel) we had that wasn't wet was the 27 acre Burton pit. I think it lasted a day and a half. Burgraff must have had sixty semi-trailer belly dumps running. From that pit they were loading Burgraff, the corps of Army Engineers, H & K, two smaller construction outfits, and the National Guard. There was a line up of trucks for a mile or two miles and they never stopped. They kept moving about three or four miles an hour with a loader on each side. The trucks would drive between them and the loaders would make a dump apiece. The semi-dumps hauling about twenty yards of material could take two dumps and hardly slow down.

They started to build that road back through the Valley. They did great until they got to Sugar City. Then they turned north and started out towards the North Fork of the Teton. There they would just get the road built back in and then that night the water would come up for some reason and wash it out. We were just starting to get our normal high water since it was the first part of June. Not only did we have the problems the dam gave to us but we didn't have any river channels. Trailer houses and farm machinery lit in the river beds and plugged them off. The river was going out through the fields. I can remember they built that road base up four, five, or six feet high through there. Finally, they got some culverts and threw them in the road so they could run the water on through.

We felt that we had to have correlation in everything that was happening. Thank goodness we had some very, very special individuals, minute men, who came on the spot. Some of them stayed with us all the way through. Devon Beattie, from the college, was there and wanted to help in any way that he could. We put him in charge of all the equipment. Anybody who was coming in who wanted to go to work, had to get clearance through us and through him. We had to know what kind of equipment they had, where it was working, how many hours it was working, and how much they expected to be paid. We use the state highway books for a pay scale for the size of the equipment being used.

I think we worked the first two weeks or three on the emergency phase. We worked without any government people here wanting to fill out all the forms before any work could be done.

It was Monday when General Brookes showed up. He was our Adjutant General for the State of Idaho, a two star general. Governor Andrus had put him in charge of the state task force.

All except fifteen of the state police officers were brought in. They set up all the road blocks. The first night one of the biggest concerns we had was security on what property was left, like jewelry stores downtown. We told our police chief, Blair Siepert, that we would put a curfew on and that nobody was allowed downtown. Anyone caught there was to be arrested. As quickly as the water dropped, a lot of people got boats and came downtown, anxious to see what was left of their businesses and the banks, and all. The police tried to fight it for a while and hold them back but finally they just gave up and said to them, go to it. They just got out of the way.

We had many people by Monday who got here and even by Sunday, who were curious to get into the area. They wanted to go through everything. When the state police got here we set up blocks on all roads into the area. They weren't supposed to let anybody in without authorization. I know that some of the state officials and some other people had a pretty rough time getting in.

The sheriff was recovering from recent heart surgery. The strain and worry would have been too much for him. According to the law, if the Sheriff is indisposed, the County Coroner is the next one who takes over. We put Coroner Grey Clawson in charge of law enforcement. He coordinated all the state police and the road blocks. He had had a great deal of experience in the military.

We had so many people trying to get into our office that we had to put guards on the door to keep them out.

By Monday morning we had decided to hold correlation meetings at 6:00 every morning with our Stake Presidents, Hugh Eyerland, President Ricks, H & K's man, and others. We gave Devon (Beattie) ten or fifteen minutes each morning to tell us just what was working and where. Anyone coming and wanting to go to work had to see him. We had the fly-by-niters who drove all the way from New York to help. It was kind of interesting. Most of the people were really great though some of them would come back and want to turn a bill into the County. Come to find out they were billing Burgraff and county for the same work. But we were organized well enough and set up well enough that we didn't have any problems in these areas.

Ronnie and Kent were superb. I don't know how we could have found any who would have worked any better than them. It was hard to believe the things that were accomplished.

When our government officials first started to come in the correlation meeting were a real lifesaver. That first Monday, General Brookes came in and asked me to go to Idaho Falls to a special meeting. I told him that I didn't know how I could get away. But he said that the meeting was very important. He came and picked me up with his staff driver and we went to Idaho Falls. The meeting was in the Civic Auditorium clear full of people. They all represented different government groups. After about an hour (of listening to them) I was so nervous I couldn't stand it. I had so many things going that I shouldn't even have been there. All we did was listen to them get up and introduce themselves and who they represented and what they had to offer in the way of help.

Finally General Brookes interrupted them. He told them he had the Chairman of the County Commissioners there. He thought it would be nice if they would give me a second to share my feelings with them. I had had a little experience working with a lot of government agencies. Maybe my patience had run out by then. Anyway I stood up and

told them that I appreciated their interest, but no thanks. We wanted to do it by ourselves. We never saw anyone from that huge assembly after that, not a one.

Hugh Fowler is probably the next man who showed up, the head of the Federal Disaster Administration. He explained that he was controlled by regulations, but he pointed out that we had never had a disaster like this one, so we could just forget the regulations, because they didn't apply here. He proved to be one of the best individuals we could ever have hoped for. There were many, many areas that he bailed us out of when we made a mistake or everything was not according to rules and regulations. We would explain it to Hugh and he would say that he understood it completely and not to worry about it. If we had had to stick to the letter of the law we would have had some serious problems and would have needed a great deal more money.

Only a few days later the head of HUD (Housing and Urban Development) came in here. I don't remember her name. She sat and explained to us what HUD was planning on doing. To provide housing for all the people who had lost their homes was the goal. All of these people were invited to attend our correlation meeting a 6:00 each morning. That was a kind of a challenge for some of them because they were not used to getting up until around 11:00.

The government agencies seemingly couldn't understand the organization of the Church and how it helped our operations. The girl from HUD came into that first meeting and said that it would take roughly anywhere from four to six months to determine how many people they had to house, what their needs were, and where they were going to put their housing. Our Stake Presidents met with the Bishops and the Bishops with their counselors, called their High Priest leaders and their Elders Quorum Presidents, and they called their home teachers, and they just contacted each person.

I can remember the first time the governor got here and met with us. He got up and told us that the state was going to do this and the state was going to do that. I finally got him by the elbow and told him that we had already done all of that. General Brookes watched the meetings and told us if there was anything we couldn't get help with that we were just to let him know and he would see what he could do. Otherwise he was happy to let the correlation group run things.

The things we saw during the flood, we just wouldn't believe. In Sugar City there was a pickup stood on its nose right up against the doorway of the seminary building. Water and picked a ten-wheeler up with a twenty-yard trailer on it and stuck another one underneath. Six trucks in the county shop were shoved out the back wall by the water. One with a twenty yard end-dump was loaded completely with poles. When we got to it the flashers were still going as if it was signaling, "Help, I'm in distress."