

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Garrett E. Case – Life during the  
Teton Flood

By Garrett E. Case

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Box 5 Folder 32

Oral Interview conducted by David Crowder

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

DC: Garrett, would you please spell your name?

GC: Garrett E. Case.

DC: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

GC: Eleven years.

DC: Why did you move to Rexburg?

GC: I was invited by President Clarke to make application to be a bookstore manager at Ricks College.

DC: Have you worked at Ricks College all those years?

GC: Yes.

DC: What was your address before the flood?

GC: Twenty Six North and Third West.

DC: What is your present address.

GC: The same.

DC: As the controversy over the Teton Dam was going on, did you have any input into that?

GC: No, not any. I felt that it was probably needed because of the flooding.

DC: Do you remember about the day when the flood occurred? What kind of a day was it?

GC: A beautiful day, as has been mentioned many times. We were doing our usual Saturday activities, except for the fact that Gale, my wife, had gone to a phase two training for scout training as a Stake Primary President. The children were home. My oldest daughter, Esther, and my second to oldest daughter, Janine, had gone to water a year for John Bonner. Janine and Esther came back screaming that the dam had broken; that we needed to go. I didn't believe it. I said, "I haven't head anything." I turned on the radio to the KADQ station. It was playing nice, tranquil music. Finally, it did come on that we should evacuate. I sent the children back to get their bikes, as they'd left their bikes at Bonners. While the children went back after the bikes, I got the rest of the children dressed. I got their shoes on and was a little concerned about my wife because she was on the river, but I k new we'd get out.

DC: How many children do you have?

GC: We had eight at the time, six girls and two boys. The youngest are twins and at that time they were just about nine months old.

DC: You didn't have any feeling of excitement?

GC: No, I don't think I was too excited. The kids were more excited. In fact, Junior was crying and I was trying to keep them calm. I assured them that there was not problem. If there was going to be a flood (I finally decided there would be one since the radio was saying there was), I had heard of the flood they had there before. It had come into Rexburg proper and had gotten up into the streets and I figured it was just going to be water on the streets. Maybe a little in the yard or something. I wasn't really concerned and I planned that we'd come up to the college and be back the next day or so.

DC: did you send anyone to warn your wife?

GC: No, by the time my children got back and we had the others dressed she had arrived in the car.

DC: What was her reaction?

GC: She was anxious to save a few things and we did pick up some, but it wasn't really much. She had scouting equipment in the back and there wasn't room for much more.

DC: When did it become apparent to you that the flood was greater than you thought?

GC: It was while we were listening to the radio and they described some of the activity and what was happening. Particularly, the last moments on KADQ as they described what was happening downtown. To look downtown it looked very calm. I know there were those who went up on the hill to watch it, but we did not purposely go up there because of the children. We wanted to keep them from being too excited about it.

DC: You did not see the flood come across the valley?

GC: No.

DC: When did you first see the flood waters?

GC: It seems like it was around three o'clock and as you looked down off the campus you could see the water.

DC: Could you see your home from where you were?

GC: NO, we were here on campus.

DC: Did you realize that your home would be flooded?

GC: Yes, we knew that there'd be water there but the extent of the damage we did not have any comprehension.

DC: When did you get back to your home?

GC: We didn't go back too soon because they were encouraging people no to go back. We didn't go back until Sunday afternoon.

DC: Did you live in an apartment here on campus?

GC: Yes. I'm the bookstore manager and I went to the bookstore and set the kids in my office to keep them away from things and out of trouble. Then as it became apparent that we weren't going to be able to go back, and there was housing offered, we did accept housing from the college.

DC: what was your initial reaction when you saw your home?

GC: It was hard to believe. There was so much mud. The doors were difficult to open because we had closed all the doors. The doors were jammed because of the mud that had gotten in. Finally, we got in. My wife was quite pleased because the baby things that she had set on the dining room table were still there. It only got up about twenty-seven inches upstairs. Things that were higher than that had no problem; things below that were messed up.

DC: Did you have any initial feelings of discouragement?

GC: Yes, I guess there was discouragement. It was such a big job. I don't believe I really comprehended all the work that there was. The next morning, Monday morning, my wife and I and some of the children came down and began to clean up. After we'd been working a couple of hours, my brother from Ogden, Lewis Case, with his wife came to help. I think that was the time when we realized that it was going to be tough. We were really happy to have them there to help us. Later in the day we had Norman Judd and his wife, Elynn; Gale's brother and sister-in-law, came to help.

DC: Your family responded rapidly?

GC: Yes, in fact the one that we really expected was my wife's brother, Norman. He did come up and he had a very hard time because he couldn't get in immediately. My brother was very insistent and said, "I'm a carpenter. I've got these tools." He had his car filled with various tools to help us. His wife cried a few tears and they let them in. They didn't let too many people in. We felt fortunate that they let them come in.

DC: AS they came to your house, can you recall their initial reaction?

GC: they were sorry for us, but they were happy to be there to help and were ready to go to work.

DC: Did they tell you they thought it was hopeless?

GC: No, we just went to work and started cleaning.

DC: When did you find out your home could not be saved?

GC: It was after we had cleaned it up and had a number of contractors look at it. We had several estimates. They started out at eighteen thousand and jumped to twenty-eight thousand. Shortly after they said, "what happened is this. After you had gotten it all cleaned our and things straightened around there appeared some cracks through the house and they have become worse." Actually, I think it would have been in September and we had planned on fixing it up. After the cracks became worse and then the foundation started getting cracks in it, we determined that it was not salvageable. We went through the process of assuring that it had been torn down.

DC: What was that process?

GC: First of all, checking with other contractors and getting their opinion as well as replacement costs and estimates. Then going through the various county offices. I think that my wife was very thorough in this. In fact, we didn't jump into it. We checked with a lot of people and then we got the authorization. We authorized the county to have it demolished.

DC: Who authorized you to do that?

GC: It was a number of people. We presented to the county the numbers of the contractors' estimates and the reparability- that it was not repairable-statements of that effect from them. Then it was turned into the county and the county made arrangements. I think it was the Corps of Engineers. After the Corps of Engineers came and looked at it they put a number on it.

DC: Was your hose cleaned up?

GC: Yes.

DC: Had you lived in it?

GC: No, it was not livable. There were problems. The sewer broke and the waterline was broken, so there was no water or sewer. The electricity had been turned off as well. We did reconnect the electricity so that we could do some work, when we hoped that we could repair it.

DC: Yes, that was fantastic. In addition to my brother and his wife, we had my wife's brother, Norman Judd, and his wife. They took our twins to their home and kept them for a week. Our younger children went to the home of Roger and Mirilyn Smith and they kept them. Roger and Marilyn came and helped us through the week as well as Quilden and Alora Howard. We had some friends from Rigby, Debbie and John Jones come also. They did some washing for us and various things. After that we had the volunteers come in. that was the second week. Maybe it was during the end of that first week that the volunteers came in, because we didn't get into our basement until after we'd basically cleaned the top floor. We have quite a large home because of our eight children and it was a lot of work.

DC: As the volunteers came, were you expecting them?

GC: No, we didn't expect them, but President Ricks arranged for them to come in. when we attended our church meetings, they said that they were going to come. When the bishop came by and asked if we could use some help, we told him yes.

DC: What was your reaction to the volunteers?

GC: We were thankful for the help, primarily, because there was so much to do. It was very heart warming to see them come in and help us. We had an accountant from Moore, Idaho. He was used to sitting behind a desk. He helped us muck out the basement and he wasn't used to that kind of physical labor. They were willing to help and their willingness was wonderful.

DC: At any time did any of the volunteers give the impression that it was hopeless to be cleaning up?

GC: No, I think that sometimes they were awed by how much destruction had taken place and what a big mess it was. They were willing to help and I think some of them became emotion at our problems. They were sorry for us, but they dug in and helped.

DC: How did the ward function? Were there meetings held?

GC: Yes, I was at that time the high priests group leader and we kept close with the bishop. They had regular meetings, at least once during the week, and then we had our regular Sunday meetings except for that first two Sunday s. we met the evening of the thirteenth as a ward. We also met during the week. We met in the Kennedy School. When things started to settle down, the second ward met in the Manwaring Center. We met there until school started, at which time; the chapel was repaired sufficiently so that we could go back into it.

DC: Can you recall any bitterness being expressed by member of the ward about their lot?

GC: for the most part they accepted it and were willing to go forward; although I know it was difficult for some more than others. I'd say ninety-eight percent of them were bolstered because of the volunteers help plus the encouragement of our stake leader, President Ricks. We met the first Sunday and the encouragement really helped. Governor Andrus said, "We'll see that things are taken care of."

The first thing that gave us comfort was the church. With the Governor being strong, that first Sunday, about how they were going to do everything possible meant a lot. They really went to bat for us. People felt that things were going to come out all right. President Kimball and Brother Packer with their message, "Steady as she goes, keep going, and work at it. Don't overtax yourself. Keep the important things in the family." It made us realize the importance of our family.

Last night, I noticed on the news, there was a flood back East and the people, who had been through it, had been thankful that they had their family. That was an important thing. We've been blessed to have compensation for the damages. It's very unusual. The encouragement that we got at the first, they would do everything possible, and President Kimball and our local church leaders saying, "Let's get in and do it," made most people get right in and work. I do know, as the high priest group leader, that it was very hard on the widows. Even though families came into help them.

One of the widows, that I home teach, didn't have my help but she had a daughter and a son-in-law in Rigby who took care of her. They came and worked with her, so she was taken care of and I didn't worry about her. The bishop was aware of every family. I think some families felt that they weren't being taken care of and needed help; we discussed it in our executive meeting each Sunday. We reviewed and tried to keep current on what was happening and who the people were who were having problems.

Our ward was one of the wards that was hit the hardest. The ones on the north side were hit the hardest because we were next to the sawmill and it was open space and the water and logs came in and damaged our area. There were ninety HUD trailers in our ward area. I felt that people accepted it and worked hard which was good therapy; not to worry about it.

DC: How did your children react?

GC: The younger ones were fearful and crying. As we got on campus, we got them calmed down and then they had a movie. The center provided a movie for the young people and we sent them upstairs. I don't believe that they saw the worst part of the flood. I don't think they really comprehended it. They will always remember it. We've kept scrapbooks of pictures and things so they know it was real and it did a lot of damage.

DC: How did they react when they found out that their possessions were washed away and their home would probably be torn down?

GC: The first one to say anything about it was Becky. She had lost one of her banners off from one of the awards that she got in Primary. She told that to her mother and her mother said, "The important thing is what you remember; it's not the ribbons." She accepted that and felt that it was probably true.

DC: Did you end up living in a HUD trailer?

GC: Yes, we lived on the campus until the ninth of August. That was the day we were supposed to leave and they finally got everything hooked up at the time we moved in.

DC: How did you get your family in one trailer?

GC: We had the twins, my wife and I in one bedroom and Becky, Gayleen, Annette, and Junior in another bedroom. Ester and Janeen were in the last bedroom. Actually, Junior slept on the couch, but occasionally he would go into the bedroom. We had everyone in there. It was very crowded. We were happy to move out. We were able to get the demolition and everything taken care of. We had an Interstate Home placed on our lot and we moved in on the twenty-second of December. Things really moved fast because my wife's uncle was an Interstate dealer and he worked with the local dealer. We got in our home in a hurry. We felt very fortunate.

DC: Is your home completed now?

GC: The upstairs is, but we still have the downstairs and the landscaping to do.

DC: As you had contact with governmental agencies, was there any time when you felt that they were giving you the run around or just hassling you?

GC: Because of my administrative position and having been in a responsible position, you have to make reports. I felt, personally, that the people that came in to help for the governmental agencies were very sensitive and did their best. I'm sure there were times when they were human just like anyone else. This was kind of a stress situation and we did find that some people were more sensitive than other people. I mean, we tried to find the people that we felt would be more sensitive and look on our plight a little more kindly. When we got our trailer, we didn't want two trailers. We anticipated moving back into our home before long. They offered us two trailers and we said, "No, we want to get out of this as soon as possible. We'll take one and then get our home fixed and get into it." When we found that we were going to have to demolish our home, we asked for a second trailer. We didn't have any place to store things. They wouldn't give it to us. It wasn't worth the hassle so we just made do. We got some tents to store the things we had saved. It turned out later, they weren't worth saving anyway.

DC: Did the Department of Housing and Urban Development try to keep the wards together?



GC: They were very helpful I felt. They were very good to us in allowing us to move onto our property, although it was difficult for them. I think it was worthwhile. In the second ward we had about six or eight families that were in the HUD village. The rest of them preferred to be on their own property. It was helpful even though it was a great deal more work and effort for them. I don't think people appreciated that as much, but it was a blessing.

DC: Was there any vandalism that took place in your area?

GC: Not to my knowledge. I'm sure there might have been some, but I think because of the security system by the state police and the county and then the fact that we lived on our property stopped a lot of it. It reduced the vandalism greatly. I do know that it happened to town and in business, but not in homes. It could have been easily washed out as stolen.

DC: Do you know of any who tried to take advantage of the situation and filed fraudulent claims?

GC: No.

DC: Everyone seemed to be very honest in their dealings with the Bureau.

GC: They tried to be. It was an individual kind of thing. I know that there were feelings that this was a government project and they should pay for it. Some thought they should pay for everything, but then we realized the total thing. People felt that if they could just get recompense for their losses, that they would feel very good about it. Normally, when a wrong is done to you, there's compensatory damages and emotion damage. They said, "We aren't going to recompense the emotional kind of things." People, in general, accepted it. They accepted that they spent their vacations working on their homes rather than vacationing or doing some other thing that they would have preferred to have done.

DC: Did you have to work here at the college while you were cleaning up?

GC: Yes, except when the flood happened. I think that Ricks College Bookstore was probably the only business in Rexburg (retail business) that was not affected. The food services were not affected and they provided a great service to the community. A lot of people thought that the bookstore would do a lot of business. We didn't. Actually, our sales were about the same as normal. We were able to help very little with the needs of the community because the needs were to clean up and they didn't need any fancy things. We did sell a lot of film and mailers. We kept the store open. My work at that time was to open the store in the morning and turned it over to Connie Clements and Claudia Barnes who were two student employees. They ran the bookstore while the staff was out helping. Ten of the thirteen full-time employees had homes or property in the flood. The other three while not directly affected, spent their time helping others who were in the flood.

DC: You have a nice home that you live in now. Has there been any response from the people to the effect that you got a good deal out of the flood?

GC: I think most people have said, "What a beautiful home." Some have said, "Gee, isn't that nice, you get a new home? It's all new and better than your old home." We tried to follow the counsel in trying to make it better. Yet, we have eight children and we made some sacrifices as to what we would get.

Our original home was well built. It had all kinds of closets, drawers, and those kind of things. In order to get into our new home, we took a pre-built home, and they don't build them that way. It is a nice home, and we hope that we'll get some closets downstairs when we have that finished, but it's not the same. The thing that I feel is that some people feel, "You've got a new home and that's a great benefit. In your new home you are better off than you were before." There may be some of that, but they've been through a lot of extra effort. They've been through a lot of heartbreak and things that you never will get back.

It's not that important really when it comes back down to the very point that we have our lives, we have our families and that's really the thing that's important. A flood could come again; that's not the important thing. The important thing is that we have our family; that we are able to survive it. Things are much more comfortable now than they were a year ago. We are not in a two bedroom apartment or a three bedroom HUD trailer. We do have some comforts. We can build things back and put things back together. I think that there might have been some jealousy. Actually, when you think of it, I think that overall the people who were there and who came down and helped recognized that there have been some problems. Their hearts came out to us. There are some who have that worldly nature and they say, "Look at the advantages that these people got." There is some jealousy and I think that it was with great wisdom that President Sonderegger and others initiated the movement to not have the claims publicized. That was reduced the amount of jealousy and with the things that people have been through; they don't need that.

DC: I've heard it mentioned that the breaking of the dam was actually God's way of humbling the people. Have you heard that kind of statement?

GC: I've heard it mentioned that the breaking of the dam was actually God's way of humbling the people. I didn't think of it too much. I was more concerned about putting things back together and providing a good life for my family. I think Brother Packer's statement was enough for me, "This was not because we were wicked. It was an error of man. As great as man is, in their technical knowledge and ability, it just proves that man is not infallible, and that it was a good test." No, I feel it was a problem that we have to work out.

DC: Do you think that the dam should be rebuilt?

GC: I think it could be rebuilt from what I've heard. Certainly, those who live in the flooding zone have the same fear as before. While they were rebuilding the dam we didn't have those floods. I think there are certain advantages; the power and the water control. I'm not going to push for it, however.

DC: As you look back over your experiences of the year, as related to the dam, is there anyway that your life has been changed?

GC: We've done a lot of work during the year. I think it certainly has helped me. Most people feel like, especially immediately after the flood, that the most important things are not material things. We do have a nice home and those things are great, but they're not the most important thing. Our family ties are very important. One of the nicest things that happened from the flood is during the first month the people were concerned about people more than they'd ever been concerned about people before. You'd stop and talk to people more than they'd ever been concerned about people before. You'd stop and talk to people and laugh about your problems. I have a desire to try and not get caught up in the busy things of the world or be so involved. I'm too busy. We haven't had a vacation since the flood. We have been down to Salt Lake a couple of times, but they were for specific things and we hurried. I don't think that's good. We need to keep the proper perspective. Up until this year, I have never taken my full vacation. I've taken all of it this year. I feel that one of the things I will do is take a vacation. I've learned how take it to be a better advantage for my family. This time I'll do a little better job of being with my family. Maybe I'll be a better father; I hope.

DC: As you would visit with your neighbors, how would you encourage each other?

GC: We had empathy for their situations because everyone in the flood had the same problems. As they would express a problem; then we would share solutions. If we knew something that they needed and was available, we could tell them. If we had been through a problem and they were just starting on that problem, we would share our experience in how to do it the easy way. If they had been through a problem that we were just entering, they would help us.

DC: Can you think of anything else during this past year that would be appropriate to this interview?

GC: I feel very appreciative of those people that helped. While I was in the service, I'd heard people say derogatory things about the Red Cross' assistance. The Red Cross was the first, outside of Ricks College, to give assistance. The Red Cross was there and they started immediately with help. We have a greater empathy for what they did and what they were able to do. Even though they pay their people and the church doesn't, I've a much higher opinion of the Red Cross than I had before. They certainly gave us help that was beneficial.

DC: What kind of assistance did you receive from the Red Cross?

GC: They helped in the feeding program at the college and that was helpful as were cleaning up. They also provided cleaning materials, which were most helpful. They were ready to step in. We got baby cribs, for our twins; because we needed some things there. They helped us get the things we needed. I appreciated mostly the things that people did for us. We couldn't have done it alone. Not only Ricks College, Red Cross and the volunteers, but the government agencies (despite the red tape and that kind of thing). The people that came in and helped, including the Bureau people, were found to be very sensitive as they tried to explain procedures and things. I know that there were a lot of unkind things said about government people, but I have empathy for them in administering the program. I felt they did an excellent job. I felt the senators got some difficult problems, but they helped and I really appreciated them.

DC: did you receive any help from the LDS Church Welfare Services?

GC: Yes, they had a similar type of help like we received from the Red Cross. They were a little slower and I think the church learned a few things. Actually, the Red Cross was centrally located, but I would estimate that the church provided more services overall than the Red Cross. The Red Cross was quicker. The church provided heavier equipment and some of the other things that the Red Cross didn't provide.

DC: Did you have any basic qualms that you had to overcome in accepting the welfare assistance?

GC: No, we needed help and we took it. We didn't think about it. It seemed like the media were always in covering things. I guess it's because people are interested and I think that's good. I was surprised to find my picture in the paper on the eighth of June, when a photographer had come in to see what we were doing to clean up. That particular picture went all over the world. We had people come and interview us quite a number of times. We had my family's picture in the Post Register probably in late July or August. Then it appeared in the Ensign in September. I felt that people should know, but I wasn't thrilled to be singled out. I did feel that if people could learn anything from it, then I was happy to share.

DC: Is there anything you'd like to add to this interview?

GC: I think that's about it.

DC: Thank you, Garrett.