

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

# Grace Forsyth – Life during the Teton Flood

By Grace Forsyth

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## Box 6 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Christina Sorensen

Transcribed by Alina Mower April 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

CS: Grace, how old are you?

GF: Fifty-eight years old.

CS: Where were you born?

GF: LaBelle, Idaho.

CS: What is your present address?

GF: Sugar City, Idaho.

CS: Where did you live at the time of the flood?

GF: In Sugar City.

CS: Did you live at the same location that you now live?

GF: Yes.

CS: Do you have a family?

GF: Yes. I have seven children.

CS: How many people were living at home at the time of the flood?

GF: Just one, my youngest daughter.

CS: Did you own your own home prior to the flood?

GF: Yes.

CS: Before the construction of the Teton Dam, did you support the construction or were you opposed to it?

GF: We supported it?

CS: What were your reasons for supporting this?

GF: We felt that it would be good for the farmers and make the irrigation better for them.

CS: Do you work for a living or are you at home during the days?

GF: I am a housewife.

CS: That morning that the dam broke, do you recall where you were and what you were doing when you heard the news?

GF: When we heard the news for the first time, we didn't have the radio on. I had my two little grandchildren there and we had just had a new calf born out in the barn. I wanted to take them out to see the calf. We were on our way out to see the baby calf and we heard a siren coming up the road. A police car drove in the driveway and he said that the dam had broken and that we would have to leave right then.

CS: What was your reaction?

GF: My reaction was that I said, "Right now? Do you mean that we don't have any time to do anything?" He said, "No. Right now." He said that it only broke at about 11:00 or just before. He told us, "You are only nine miles from the dam so you had better get out."

CS: What did you do then?

GF: My husband said that it was the first time he has seen me so excited. I got a little bit excited; of course the grandchildren did, too. They were just small. The one was eight years old and the other one was three. They could see that I was excited. They said to me, "What are we going to do Grandma?" I said, "We'll do what the policeman said to do, we'll get in the car." Our one car needed some gas so my husband took it out and filled it up. It was just about a quarter after twelve and I was frying chicken. The kids were hungry, so I thought the best thing to do would be to fix some lunch for them. I got into the fridge and got some milk and fruit, bread and butter and other things for a sandwich. I thought that wherever we went, we could fix a sandwich. We were just ready to leave when my daughter came to get her children. They owned the Sugar Merc then. It is called the Schofield Food Village now. They said that they had told them to leave too and that we had better all go together. We piled into the car and my husband said that he was going to stay. The policeman said, "You can stay until we leave, but that's all." So he stayed and we left and went up on the Rexburg hill.

My daughter's husband's half-brother lived on the hill. We went up there and stayed at their home that night. My husband stayed down until the police all went out from our place. In the meantime, our daughter had just left to go to Teton City. We were wondering if she got there, so my husband drove up there to see if she made it home. On his way back, he checked to see if all the neighbors were out. When we drove away from our house, I said, we'd better go see a couple of ladies that I knew didn't have cars and see if they had left. Someone had already taken them out. We drove to the hill east of Rexburg and worried. From there we watched the flood come down over our place. We could see from the hill when it came. We live on Highway 33, the first house on the right. We could see when it came down over our place. It looked like a big cloud of dust. I didn't ever realize that there would be that much water. We watched it come into Rexburg with everyone else did.

CS: How did you feel when you saw your home hit by the floodwaters?

GF: We couldn't see our house. We just assumed that it was gone. It kept saying over and over on the radio that the fifteen foot waves hit a mile and a half out of Sugar City and that is where we live. You could see the cloud of dust made by the waves. I wondered what it would look like when we went back.

CS: Did you see from the hill, or anywhere along the way, any animals trying to escape the floodwaters?

GF: We were too far away to see the animals until the water got over to Rexburg, then you could see some floating. You could also see houses floating. We were worried. That is why my husband wanted to stay. We had a dairy farm there and we had about seventy-five head of dairy cows, plus a lot of young stock. He wanted to stay to see if he could do anything for them. He couldn't have done anything but he felt like he could have if they would let him stay. However, they didn't let him stay. We found a few of our cows down in Sugar City up on some of those high potato cellars and some in the houses the next day.

CS: Were they still alive?

GF: Yes. We found our very best dairy cow. She gives eleven gallons each milking and her poor bag was just dragging and milk was running out. We found her in one of the houses downtown. She was just standing there bellowing. We gathered up as many of our cows as we could and took them back to the farm and the dairy barn. Everything was gone. All the fences and the corrals were gone, just the barn was left standing. We tried to put them in the barn but they soon scattered because there was not much water and hay. That was all washed away, too. Then we had to gather up the cows again. At that time, we couldn't get any place to milk them. They were all ruined. Finally, we just sold them to the market.

CS: After you went up to the hill and to a place to stay, when were you first able to return to your property? What did you find there and what was your reaction?

GF: We walked back in on Sunday morning. We thought that we would go to Sugar cemetery out on the hill from Rexburg. We drove the car that far and then we walked the rest of the way. We had to wade quite a bit of the time. Of course, we lived out of Sugar City so we didn't go right into town then. We walked out on the highway, which was all washed away. When we got out to where you turn off on Highway 33, it was just like a river going across. We didn't know whether to walk in or not. But we got in single file and my husband got a stick and went in ahead of us. We held on to him. We walked in with water above our knees with swift water going along like a river. We could see that our house was still standing. There were big tractors and trees around it. We could see some of our trees were gone. We had one of those big old styled red barns that we had just painted. We had painted it up nice and had painted all the corrals. It was gone completely, only a few poles were standing. When we went in the house, I can't tell you how I felt. It looked like a giant mixmaster had stirred everything up. There was still mud. The water had gone down, but it was full

of mud, straw, manure and trees were in the windows. Doors were broken and the ones that weren't broken completely off, had parts of them broken through. Some of our furniture was washed out and some of it was stirred up. Other things that were in the bedroom were clear out in the family room. They had turned around corners so the water must have really swirled around. It was quite a mess.

CS: At that time, or at anytime during the next few months, did you feel a point of total despair or hopelessness over what needed to be done?

GF: No. We felt that we had lost everything that we had gained. We moved out there twenty-seven years ago. We felt like now we would have to start all over again as far as landscaping. We could see that the house was pretty well ruined. However, the upstairs was still intact. We say now that we should have stayed in it and stayed upstairs. One side of it was sagging and the garage side was knocked off. A big tree from up in the canyon must have hit the garage. The tree was still laying in the back yard. It was completely peeled just like someone had peeled the bark off of it. There wasn't a limb or any bark on it. It was as slick as if someone had deliberately barked it. We knew that it was a real tragedy, but I don't think that we ever despaired.

CS: What sort of thing did you take in the next few days to begin cleaning up?

GF: We started cleaning out everything that we could. People came in to help us. We couldn't get into our place for about five days because there were no roads. Anyone that came in had to walk in. The friends and neighbors walked in to our house. We really didn't do much except just clean out some of the things and try to sort out a little bit of the things that we could find. We didn't have any water to wash things with so we just had to sit it out and leave it.

CS: Were you able to move back into your upstairs level or did you have to find other housing?

GF: No, we didn't move back into it. We didn't have any electricity. I don't remember now long before they put the power lines in. Since we were out on a farm, we didn't have any electricity. I don't think any of Sugar City did either for a long time.

CS: What did you do for housing?

GF: We stayed at Mel and Bonnie Hammonds the first night. The following two nights we stayed in Teton City with the Reed Holists.' The next day Bill and Mr. Holist and Marion went into our place on their horses. They brought out two of my favorite quilts so that we could clean off the mud. Bill, our son-in-law and Karen, our daughter, were moving, too. They were in the process of moving out of Sugar City and a lot of their things that were at our house got washed away. We all went up to Bill's folks and stayed two nights up there. Mrs. Holist had her mother and a lot of her family that she needed to find places for so we decided to go to LaBelle, my old home town where I was born. I have an aunt down there and also some other relatives. In the meantime, my aunt had gotten word up to us to come down there and stay. So we went to LaBelle. We stayed there until the first of July. Then Cheryl, our

daughter from Toronto, came. Then there were too many of us to stay in LaBelle so we went to St. Anthony. My daughter, Cheryl, is married to Kay Briggs, and his brother, Hal, lived in St. Anthony. They were leaving on a month long vacation to Florida. They got in touch with us and told us that if we wanted to stay in their home while Cheryl and Kay were here, we could do that. So we went to St. Anthony for a month until HUD brought us a trailer and set it up for us. We have lived in the trailer ever since then.

CS: Did you put the trailer on your own property?

GF: Yes.

CS: What is being done to your old home?

GF: It was torn down completely. At first we were going to remodel it and so we tore everything out and got ready to repair it. But it had started to sag at the bottom. We had the government come out and check it out. They decided that it should be torn down. They demolished it on Election Day.

CS: How did you feel watching that happen?

GF: It wasn't very much fun. After living there that long and having done all the work in our house. We had remodeled an old home. It was one of the first homes that was built sixty years ago in Sugar City. They say that it was one of the oldest homes in Sugar. We had remolded it and changed it completely. We had done all of the work and we were quite proud of it. We had mixed feelings about seeing it being torn down. In fact, my husband wanted to rebuild it. We got quite a lot of pressure from everyone saying that we probably wouldn't like it and that it wouldn't be practical. We are now in the process of building a new home in the same place. It should be ready by the first of October.

CS: In your dealings over the next few weeks and months with various organizations such as the Red Cross, the L.D.S. Church and the government, how do you think that they operated? Do you think that they were effective? How did you feel about your involvement?

GF: I think that they were very effective. I felt really good about these organizations. Like one man said, it was the most convenient disaster that he had ever seen. I didn't know that it was really convenient, but I think that we were cared for very well. I have no complaints at all. I think that all the organizations came in and the Church did a lot. We depended on the Church more than the Red Cross or any of the other organizations. We felt that was the thing that we should do. It is the first time that I have had to go to the welfare to get a pair of shoes. I had some old slippers on when we left because I didn't take the time to change. I didn't have any idea that we wouldn't be able to get back in. Out clothing was all on the bottom floor and so all of our shoes were gone. We couldn't find any shoes to wear. The Monday we went in

and each of us got a pair of shoes. It seemed quite strange. I am sure that we shouldn't feel that way when it is needed. We got some groceries and a few other things. We felt like we were well cared for. I think that all the people felt that way, too. I don't think that you will have very many people say that they weren't well cared for.

CS: Did you have any volunteer help that came in to help you with your home during the next few weeks?

GF: Yes. We had several men that came in. We didn't ask for any of the ladies to come out because we didn't have any water to wash out bottles or anything like that. We left them until we could get them out. I can't remember how many came to help. There would be six or eight at a time that would come and help shovel out all our things. We had our cousins from Osgood come and help us, too. They brought their tractor and things and helped move some of the trees and heavy things that we couldn't move. We took a lot of clothing down to LaBelle to wash.

CS: What did you think of the volunteer program?

GF: I think that it was wonderful. Those people really did a lot to help. They were really wonderful to come. They came in from all over. We had people from Salt Lake and Provo. I think that even some people from Oregon came to help. It is amazing how people rally to do something like this.

CS: Was there any one item that you lost in your home that was irreplaceable and that you felt particularly bad about losing?

GF: To tell you the truth, I think I missed my deep freeze the most. We haven't got one to replace it yet. We are trying to struggle along. Living on a farm, you are used to buying in bulk and having things on hand. We haven't tried to store too much yet with our trailer. It is hard to have a place for storage. We are planning to get everything back as soon as we get the basement in our new house fixed. I'll tell you something very funny. I have a beautiful quilt that was given to us when my husband was a Bishop. When he was released the ward made a quilt with all the names of the people in the ward on it. I have always told everyone that if anything ever happened, if the house caught on fire or anything, I told them where the quilt was and to grab it. When the flood came I never even thought of grabbing that quilt. I guess I really was excited. When we went back the next morning, that was the first thing that I looked for. I had it upstairs and it was all right.

The thing that my husband thought that he had lost was his Book of Remembrance. We had his Book of Remembrance kept right up to date. He had written his personal history in it and everything. If it had been where he usually kept it, it would have been gone. He usually kept it in his drawer in his bedroom. About two weeks before the flood, someone had called and asked him for his line of authority. I had taken the book out and instead of putting it back, I'd put it up on the shelf by the telephone. It was on the top shelf and so it was saved. He really appreciated that. Our church books and all of our good books that we enjoyed were in a low bookcase. I felt really bad about losing them. We were going to try to save

them. In fact, we took them out of the bookcase even though they were wet. I tried to keep them. We aired them out and set them out in the sun. They got all wrinkled and started to smell. Everyone tried to advise us not to keep them. They said they would have germs in them. I didn't know whether they would smell or not after the sun was on them, but they did. Most of the things that you find now still have the flood odor in them.

CS: As you recovered and tried to put everything back together, what would you say was the biggest problem that you faced? Was there any one thing that bothered you more than anything else? Especially with your dairy farm. Were there special problems that you faced with that?

GF: That was a real problem. We solved it by not going back into the dairy. We haven't gone back into the dairy at all. Our son that was on a mission, was going to take over the dairy when he came home. He was in Australia, and he heard all the news of the flood on a news flash. We wrote to him and asked him if he was interested in starting all over again. It takes about seven years to get your cows and build up a dairy. You can't go out and buy good dairy cows. It has to come from breeding and planning. He said that he would rather go to school. So we didn't go back into the dairy business. In fact, we sold what was left of the barn, just the way it was, to one of our neighbors up the road. They had some cattle that they had saved. He wanted to go back into dairy farming and so we sold what was left to him. He has it fixed up now.

Our biggest problem right now is getting our land back in shape. This year we haven't been able to get our ditches and other things back in order. So we are just summer fallowing it now. I believe our land is the hardest thing to get back into production. However, we have been doing our own building on our house and it has been a struggle. We are gaining on it now, though.

CS: When you filed your claim with the BOR, did you feel that you were fairly treated by them?

GF: We have filed, but we haven't received our money yet. There were a few things like our land and ditches that they wanted to cut down on. But we didn't feel that it should be. We are in the process right now of getting re-verification. They are really nice about it. They said that if we wanted to get some new verification and write up some things, they would be glad to go over it again. That is where we are as far as the BOR is concerned.

CS: There has been some talk of some people filing fraudulent claims. Without mentioning any names, are you aware of any people that have filed these?

GF: I am not aware of any. I have heard of some that did in the newspaper. Most of the people that I know tried to file honestly.

CS: Immediately following the flood, did your property suffer any vandalism that you knew of?



GF: We didn't have any vandalism at our place. We had a few things that we couldn't move for quite some time, but we hammered up the stairway so that no one could get to it. I didn't know if anyone ever came. I don't know if we lost anything. However, some of our neighbors had some antiques and people came in and looted these. I guess that I didn't have anything that they wanted.

CS: As you have watched Sugar City rebuild, which they certainly had to do over the last year almost completely, what positive things have you seen come out of this for the community as a whole? And if any, what negative things have you seen happening?

GF: The most positive thing that I can see is that everyone has been happy to build back right where they are. They are happy to make things a little better than they were before. When President Kimball was up to speak, that is what he said to do. Take our time and think it out and build back better. I don't think that he meant bigger or fancier, but to make it something that we would be proud of and have for a lifetime. I am sure that that is the way that most of the people have done. They have tried to make it so that Sugar City will be a nice little city again, like it was. I think that most of the people feel that their homes are what they want for the rest of their lives. I think that they have done a good job. There have been a few people with negative reactions, but as a whole I think that the people are quite well satisfied.

CS: I realize that this response will be your own opinion, but have you noticed any difference between the responses of the people to the disaster and rebuilding experience between the ages?

GF: Yes, definitely. I think that this has been a real traumatic experience for the older people. The elderly people have really had a struggle accepting this. They have lived all of their lives with the things and it is hard for them to see anything in the future. I think that even at our age, it has been a little bit harder for us to accept than it is for the young people. We were at the point that we thought we were about ready to retire. Maybe you don't ever retire. Maybe that is the wrong way to think. On the whole, the young and the people our age are really coming back strong. I think that the elderly people have really had a hard time. It has been so hard for some of them that they still can't accept the fact that things are gone. I have some friends and I feel like it is really hard for them to face.

CS: Did you or any member of your family have any specific or general religious experiences that you would care to relate?

GF: I can't think of any that are spectacular. I think that it is all sort of a spiritual experience. I think that we had to depend on our good judgment and I think that is what the Lord expects us to do. We knew that we had to depend on him for the peace of mind. I believe that is why most of us did feel this peace and contentment. I think that we believe in the personal Heavenly Father, someone that understands us and can give us the encouragement and peace of mind that we need. To me, that was a

spiritual experience in that respect. But as far as anything really spectacular, like losing something and finding it, I can't think of anything.

CS: Did you notice any difference in reaction to the disaster between L.D.S. people and non-L.D.S. people in the community, or between the active and inactive members of the Church?

GF: I am sure that the people that are inactive most of the time were the ones that were most restless. I can't think of any specific examples right now but I am sure the active people accept things like this better than the inactive. I feel that we have some strength that maybe the inactive people don't have. However, we had some real good non-member friends and neighbors that lived close and I visited with some of them and I felt like they were just as determined to build back and be as strong as we were. Even though they don't belong to the LDS church. They had a real faith in God. I feel like they had the same feelings that we did toward their God. They built back and were anxious to make things go again just like we were.

CS: There has been some speculation as to the cause of the failure of the dam. Most people say that it was a man-made disaster and some have expressed the idea that it was an act of divine retribution. How do you feel about that?

GF: I don't think that it was an act of divine retribution. I think it was definitely a man-made disaster. My main feeling on it is that they filled the dam too fast. They didn't have their spillways ready and I think that it was a foolish move to fill it so fast when they weren't ready to handle the extra water. Most of us that have lived on a farm and know how to irrigate know that when you put a dirt dam in, you just can't put a lot of water in it because it will go right out. You have to build up slow and let it set and kind of grow. That's my opinion. I think that they filled it too fast when they weren't ready to. I don't know if any one man is to blame. I just think that in their whole construction, they were unwise. They didn't have things ready to fill it that full.

CS: Now that there is talk about the dam being rebuilt, would you be in favor of that? If so, would you be in favor of the same location as before?

GF: Not particularly. If they did, they would surely have to do a lot of different building than they have done. I think there are other ways that they could take care of that run-off water without building another dam, if they wanted to without putting people in jeopardy.

CS: As you have looked back over the last year, Grace, the experiences that you and your family have undergone since the flood and trying to rebuild, what, if any, changes have you noticed in your own personal attitudes or beliefs or even you personality?

GF: I think that a disaster like this always makes you stop and think. We take too many things for granted. We think that everything is just going to be normal. I think that we realized that our material things weren't as important as some of the spiritual things in

our lives. The thing that I was most thankful for was that none of our family or friends or people in our community were drowned, which could have happened. I have been quite thankful. I feel like it has made me more appreciative of the things that I have. I know that I have lost my patience sometimes. I get tired and wonder why you have to go through all of this. I don't feel like that is anything that has hurt us in that respect. I think that we can be strong again and just as happy if we want to. If we keep looking back and trying to find things to grumble about, then I think that we will lose by it. I think that we need to look into the future and see what we can do and build back. We need to make it a good place for our grandchildren and the people as they come along.

CS: I don't have any specific questions now, Grace. Is there anything that you would like to say at this time?

GF: There is one thing that I grieved about as I got to thinking when you asked me if there was something special that I lost in the flood. The morning of the flood I had just finished painting an old antique manure spreader that I planned to plant flowers in. Maybe if those people that picked up those antiques could have found this one, they would have taken it. We didn't find it until several days later. This old iron manure spreader had been in our back field for quite a few years and I had been trying to get my husband to bring it up and let me use it for a flower pot. This spring we brought it into the yard and I had just put about \$35 worth of paint on it. I had just finished the last painting that morning. We had it full of dirt. I was planning on planting twelve dozen red, white and blue petunias for the bicentennial. I had it all figured out how I was going to arrange it.

One of the first things that I looked for outside was my manure spreader. As the water receded, everywhere we went I said to look for that green-yellow wheel on my manure spreader. We never did find it until in October, after redoing the canal out back. They found it about a third of the way down in the field under the dirt and trees. When they got the drag line that far, I asked if they wouldn't lift the spreader out carefully because I still wanted it. They did and it only had two or three dents in it. Other than that, it was all right. I will have to repaint it, though. I was happy to get that back. That was one thing that I looked for and everybody teased me about it. I am still going to use it in my landscaping now. I may paint it a little different color because we have changed the color of our house. We are putting white brick on our house where we had had pink before. I was happy to find that. It was a fun experience.

CS: Is there anything else that you would like to add on top of that? Are there any last thoughts or feelings about the event?

GF: I wouldn't want to go through it again, I feel that we certainly can be thankful. When we hear the news on some of these other floods and how many people died, then I feel that we are fortunate. Now it is just a matter of making up our minds to go ahead and do the things that need to be as best as we can do them. There is no reason why we can't make Sugar City beautiful again. Of all the areas, I feel that Wilford

residents got hurt the worst. So much land up there will never be used again. I think that eventually we will get ours back to normal. We are quite happy about it. We feel like we will be able to go ahead and really make a go of it.

CS: Thank you very much.