

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

# Hettie Burks Brown – Life during the Teton Flood

By Hettie Burks Brown

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## Box 5 Folder 25

Oral Interview conducted by Mary Ann Beck

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

MB: Mrs. Brown, where were you born?

HB: I was born in Santa Maria, California.

MB: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

HB: Seven years.

MB: Would you spell your full name?

HB: Hettie Burks Brown.

MB: How old are you?

HB: Thirty-two.

MB: Do you have a family?

HB: Yes.

MB: How many were living in your home?

HB: My husband, myself, and our five children.

MB: What was your address at the time of the flood?

HB: 22 West 2<sup>nd</sup> South in Rexburg.

MB: What do you do for a living?

HB: I'm a homemaker.

MB: How long have you lived in this area?

HB: For seven years.

MB: Did you win your own home?

HB: Yes.

MB: Did you support or oppose the Teton Dam?

HB: I supported it because it was needed and this year of drought we could have used that water.

MB: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton Disaster?

HB: No, we didn't.

MB: Where were you and your family when the Teton Dam broke?

HB: My husband, Max, had an army school to attend and asked us to all go for the summer to Indianapolis, Indiana, for two months and one month returning through Arkansas and two weeks in the California Reserves.

MB: What was your first reaction when you heard that the dam had failed?

HB: It was unbelievable. We were average tourists that Saturday and went to a zoo, monuments, museum, picnic and the Indianapolis 500 from 10:00 in the morning until 6:15 that night. We'd only returned from California but she insisted on talking to Max. I thought Dad was in danger because he's in ill health.

MB: What did you think about and how did you feel when you heard of the floodwaters rolling through Rexburg?

HB: Well, she heard we would get ten feet of water and I immediately began to calculate how much damage that would do. We knew (when news media reported half an hour later) that if homes were lost, Max's mother's home couldn't possibly survive the floodwaters. Somehow we never considered her beautiful gardens and yard she'd worked on for over twenty years before her death would be destroyed too. We were concerned about lives and the beautiful countryside and the people in Indianapolis worried for us too. It was surprising how many friends and relatives they had in Idaho who were hit or who were volunteer workers that we got information from and my Mom continued to keep us informed.

MB: What was the damage you suffered as a result of the flood?

HB: Our home we were told had two feet of water in the basement. They meant after the water had receded. Actually, the basement had been submerged totally and seven inches upstairs. We had an attic bedroom though that was untouched. We had rented our home for three months to four college students downstairs and they lost everything. We moved many of our personal things in the storeroom and laundry room out of their way for the summer and those items were just indistinguishable because of the mud and water and everything. Some things, on the other hand, were saved because we had moved them to the attic before leaving. The main floor we rented out and later took college housing to finish the session. We lost a washer and dryer and freezer and lawnmower-we'd only had a year and a half. We'd lost most of Mom's little knickknacks and albums and things that she'd left us that I had packed away to pass onto my children.

MB: What was the most cherished item you lost in the flood?

HB: The furniture and appliances could all be replaced but Mom's things and the albums, my children's baby books I'd made up for them were irreplaceable.

MB: How soon after the flood were you able to return to your home?

HB: Max had been to the Army school one week when the flood hit. The Red Cross and Max's brother-in-law officially notified us so that the Army would give him a week to come home. He arrived by airplane Tuesday morning.

MB: What was his reaction?

HB: In the calls he had difficulty getting out of Idaho Falls to us back in Indianapolis. He gave us unbelievable news. Our town was dirty and smelly and ruined. Some land sites were missing, others indistinguishable, Mom's house was gone and the yards, pine trees, lilac trees, fruit trees were wiped out. It was an empty lot but for a dead cow and the two remaining front steps. Johnson's Drugs, the newly remodeled Village Shop, Bowen's Music Store, the floors had all collapsed and were dangerous to go in. Homes and stores were being marked for pulling out and already leveled. He told of people coming in with lunches and tools to help-coming early by bus and coming in with lunches and tools to help-and leaving late. The noise of the helicopters overhead bringing in supplies and taking out debris. The rattlesnakes. He told us of piles of garbage deposited on the streets and being carried away and quickly replaced with more. Food storage, clothes, mementos, appliances, toys; everything was reduced to rubble and taken out to the streets to be carried away.

MB: Did you continue to stay in Indianapolis for the summer?

HB: Max had to stay two weeks to help cleanup the house and the Army said it was fine. When he returned to us in Indianapolis he said, "A lot of families were sending children to relatives out of the area. We would only tax the city more in housing and food and our house had to air out before repairs anyway." So he decided to finish the school and then we would return early. He completed the school in one more week and did some work for Fort Benjamin Harrison until the end of July. We kept in touch with Max's sister and brother-in-law, our home teacher and a man who cleaned from HUD. They advised us that everyone was waiting for plumbers, electricians, carpenters, heating, and we would have difficulty in the initial rush and commotion so we continued our plans- two family reunions of my family in Arkansas and go to California for Reserves and see my parents there. When we did get back, we lived in our dirty dusty old house as we cleaned and rebuilt downstairs.

MB: Did you have any unusual experiences in connection with the flood when you returned?

HB: The miraculous experiences was the volunteer work. Max said every day (for the two weeks he was in Rexburg) there were three and four women upstairs cleaning and three and four men in the basement helping him and Ben, his brother-in-law from Idaho

Falls. That was from 8:00 in the morning to about 12:00 midnight or 2:00 a.m. in the wee hours working.

MB: How did you go about cleaning up your property?

HB: Max and Ben and volunteers helped pull rugs out first. In the basement, the couch and chairs had to be chopped with an ax to get them out because they were heavy with water and mud. Fruit jars were saved and a velvet picture of Christ in Gethsemane floated; it didn't even stain.

MB: How long had it been floating?

HB: Well, until we got it out about four days after the flood.

MB: What were some of the problems with which you were confronted when you returned to Rexburg?

HB: WE had to take pictures inside and out of the destruction for HUD and then the shoveling and packing out of everything. My photo albums and the five baby books were dissolved to curled paper. Max got an infection on his ankles when he waded in the mud for which he got a tetanus shot.

MB: What problems gave you the most frustrations?

HB: The same as most people encountered, getting a furnace and heat in. For us, it was the first of December before we had heat but HUD gave us two standing heaters to use.

MB: Did you receive any help in cleaning up your property?

HB: Agencies and volunteers associated with churches and organizations helped in repairing and cleaning and replacing things. There's a lot of paper work but I can't see that it is necessary. One of our friends on the hill took laundry and bedding- any washable from the basement that were salvaged- and washed many times and stored it in her attic until I returned. In September, we were able to get carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and appliances with unusual speed as we came to that particular problem. Everyone was concerned for us and they kept check in progress. I mean literally- repairmen would return to see that we were under control or at a point where they would be needed. Friends did the same. We seemed to have more encyclopedia, food storage and insurance salesmen at our door than I remember from the past six years. I can't believe how methodically and organized everything seemed to go in the assistance the city received.

MB: Thank you very much, Mrs. Brown.