

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

Mary Ann Beck – Life during the  
Teton Flood

By Mary Ann Beck

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Box 5 Folder 16

Oral Interview conducted by Sandy Reed

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

Sandy Reed: Miss Beck, where were you born?

Mary Ann Beck: Rexburg.

SR: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

MB: All of my life.

SR: Could you spell your name for us, please?

MB: Mary Ann Beck.

SR: How old are you, Mary Ann?

MB: Thirty-six.

SR: Do you have a family?

MB: No.

SR: How many were living in your home at the time of the flood?

MB: One.

SR: Was that yourself?

MB: Yes.

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

MB: Route 4, Rexburg, Idaho.

SR: What is your present address now?

MB: Route 4, Rexburg, Idaho.

SR: What do you do for a living?

MB: I am a business woman and I work at the Washington School, also.

SR: How long have you lived in this area?

MB: Thirty-six years.

SR: Did you own your home, farm, or business before the flood?

MB: Yes.

SR: All three?

MB: Yes.

SR: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam?

MB: I supported it for this main reason: we in the valley needed it for flood control and we needed the extra water for the different people in the valley, for the farmers, because we have been short on water for years.

SR: Did you or any member of your family have a premonition of the Teton disaster?

MB: No, I didn't.

SR: Where were you when the Teton Dam broke?

MB: I was in West Yellowstone with my girlfriends for the weekend.

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

MB: I couldn't believe it. I thought that I was in a daze.

SR: Did you try to save any household or personal belongings?

MB: I couldn't get to a phone. The phones and communications were out.

SR: Then you didn't see the flood coming?

MB: No.

SR: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed, what preparations to save your property or business did you undertake?

MB: None.

SR: Did you have any unusual or miraculous experiences connected with the flood?

MB: Only that I was gone for the three days.

SR: Did you see any animals trying to escape the flood waters?

MB: No.

SR: Where did you stay the first two or three days after the flood?

MB: I was in West Yellowstone at a motel called Three Bears.

SR: Did you continue to stay there during the cleanup?

MB: I stayed there until the 7<sup>th</sup> of June and then I came to my home.

SR: How did you get there and what was your first reaction when you saw the destruction of your property?

MB: When I returned on June 7<sup>th</sup> it was a town of destruction. The evening of June 4<sup>th</sup> was the last time I was to travel the Sugar City overpass on the way to West Yellowstone about 9 pm and stayed at the Three Bears. At the time that the Teton Dam broke, I was spending the day with my friends at Old Faithful. We heard comments about a dam breaking there but we didn't figure it was our peaceful Teton Dam. We had fun until we got to our motel and we heard a scurry around the motel. Anita went to get some ice. When she came back, she ran into our room and said, "Turn on the TV." We said, "Why?" She said, "The Teton Dam has broken." We sat on the edge of our beds with our eyes glued on the TV. I was petrified, shocked, and wondered whether my eyes were really playing tricks on me or not. I saw the whole town of Rexburg under water. In wonder and awe, I saw some homes floating down the Main Street of Rexburg. In fact, I saw my aunt's floating. Then we heard on TV that the State of Idaho called the National Guard out for emergency action. That is when we debated on whether we should come right home or stay and the other two wanted to leave right then. The decision had been made; Anita and Connie were leaving and Carol and I would wait until it was daybreak to come back to Rexburg.

Before Anita and Connie left for Rexburg, we all knelt down for prayer. We were up there for a Special Interest activity so Ron Bird, the Priesthood representative, gave the prayer. When he finished I had no panic to get home for some unknown reason. I was calm about the whole thing. I had peace in my heart that I should stay in West Yellowstone that evening, since I had told my relatives that I would be gone for the weekend. We said goodbye to the other two girls and they started out. Not knowing what the roads were like, they were going on faith.

I spent two restless nights in West Yellowstone thinking about my home and relatives. The next day, Sunday, I went to Church but my heart wasn't there; it was in Rexburg thinking of my home and if it was, of the two girls that had left the night before, and whether they had made it there or not. I didn't make it home until Monday, June 7. The Bishop's sister was up in West Yellowstone and she offered me a ride home. We started out Monday afternoon. We came through Felt, Idaho, the conditions in Teton wer so bad, the bridges were washed out, lumber was scattered in fields, tractors were turned over and cattle were dead and the crops were under water. I was getting worried and anxious to see my home. For a moment I thought that I had made a mistake by not coming home with Anita and Connie.

When we entered Rexburg it looked like a national disaster had hit it, mud and debris was all over. Traffic was only going one way and only on certain roads. The National Guard was on tabs picking up dead animals on Main Street and surrounding area. All the stores were boarded up with signs that read, "Out of Business", or others were cleaning businesses up in fishing boats. We then drove past Ricks College on our way home. It was like an invasion of helicopters. They were flying and landing on the hill just like flies. The college campus was a lifesaver for the valley. After we drove past the campus, we drove to my home, a mile and a half west of town.

The best sight that I saw was my home standing in one piece. Nervous, I got out of the car and ran to my home. In fact, I could hardly get the key to open the door for fear of what I would face when I opened the door. To my good fortune the top floor was dry. I ran through all my rooms. Everything was dry. I then went to my car and started it; to my surprise my car started. I thanked the Knights of Rigby, Idaho. Then I looked around and found that there was no electricity and no water for three days. I had five and a half feet of water in my basement. With one more inch it would have been on my top floor. I was still walking around in a daze at what condition Rexburg relieved that I was spared from any more damage and thanked God for the goodness and mercy that he had shown towards me.

SR: What damage did you suffer as a result of the flood?

MB: My pump was gone, my stairway was gone in my basement, and about forty acres of my property had to be leveled. Logs were on it and debris was on all my farmland.

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

MB: Nothing, really, because the pump could be restored and the stairway could be restored and I was really quite lucky that way.

SR: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the floodwaters roll through the area on TV?

MB: I was petrified. I thought that my eyes were playing tricks on me. I asked myself if what I was seeing on the screen was really Rexburg, Idaho.

SR: How did you go about cleaning your property?

MB: Soil Conservation hired some boys and men to clean up. They took the logs and the debris off the farmland. Then HUD came in and sopped out my basement because it was a dirt floor. They built me a new stairway, also.

SR: What were some of the problems which you were confronted with?

MB: No electricity and no water, everything was turned off.

SR: Are these the problems that gave you the most frustration?

MB: No problem gave me frustration because I wasn't here for three days during the flood or after the flood.

SR: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experiences during the cleanup operations?

MB: No. the only uplifting experience I had was that three days after the flood I came home and found my home standing in one piece.

SR: Did you personally suffer any vandalism or other forms of lawlessness?

MB: No, none at all.

SR: What kind of government aid did you receive immediately after the flood?

MB: HUD and the Soil Conservation came to clean up the debris of my property.

SR: Did you receive any assistance from the Latter-Day Saints or other church groups immediately after the flood?

MB: Yes, the volunteers came out and helped along with the Soil Conservation, in cleaning up the debris and things.

SR: Did you receive any assistance from the Red Cross or from other private or independent organizations?

MB: I went in and got some buckets and mops for the HUD men to sanitize my basement.

SR: What government agencies did you deal with during the recovery operations?

MB: HUD and BOR.

SR: Were they very effective?

MB: Yes, they did a fine job.

SR: Did you have any dealings with the county or state authorities or law enforcement officers during the flood?

MB: Yes. When I was in West Yellowstone for three days I went to the Sheriff's office in West Yellowstone to get the conditions of Rexburg. They didn't really know what was going on in Rexburg, I guess, except it was a different state and they really didn't have any up to date news on it like I thought they should have. I felt that they were lacking in knowledge.

SR: So weren't they very effective?

MB: No.

SR: Do you feel that any who assisted in recovery operations took advantage of you or the government, especially in getting money without really earning it?

MB: Not that I know of. But some of my friends say that there has been a few cases that have done that.

SR: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed false flood claims?

MB: Yes. I read of two brothers in the paper. I guess everybody did. They put fraudulent flood claim amounts down and they got sent to prison for it, too.

SR: Do you feel that the flood was divine punishment or a natural man-made disaster?

MB: I don't think that it was a man-made disaster and I don't think that the BOR intentionally wanted to have the dam break. I think that some of their engineers just made some misjudgments on their work.

SR: Do you feel that the dam should be rebuilt?

MB: Yes, I do. The people of Teton, Rexburg, and Wilford need the dam for water and irrigation purposes and flood control.

SR: Do you think that they should build it in the same place?

MB: They probably could build it in the same place if they reviewed precautions.

SR: How has the Teton disaster changed your life?

MB: It hasn't made any major changes. The town is a brand new town since the flood. I have had to do some of the leveling on my property which I didn't seem to do before and I had to put back new fences on my property.

SR: What was your opinion of the Appreciation Day that was held?

MB: I think it was a good and divine idea when it first got started. But I think that the local people should have supported it better than they did. The volunteers that came in saved us about \$10,000. That is what Senator Frank Church told us in the assembly on Saturday.

SR: What do you think of the BOR? Do you think that they treated you fairly in their dealings with you?

MB: Yes. In the dealings I have had with the BOR, they really have dealt with me fairly, I think. They have knocked some money, some of my claim down, but in the overall they did a fair job.

SR: Would you like to add anything else?

MB: The only thing is that I think that Rexburg has come out of this Teton disaster smelling like a rose. They are better off than they were before. I think that the new buildings and the money they have got appropriated for them was great.

SR: Do you think it changed any of the people's attitudes?

MB: I think that the majority of the people found out their family is the most important thing and that their cars, their property, everything worldly, can be gone and swept away in a matter of minutes. But your families and your children are for eternity.

SR: Do you think that it made them less materialistic than they were?

MB: Yes. I think that it made them more humble.

SR: Thank you very much.