

The Teton Dam Disaster Collection

**Rex Bennion – Life during the
Teton Flood**

By Rex Bennion

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Box 5 Folder 17

Oral Interview conducted by Mary Ann Beck

Transcript copied by Sarah McCorristin May 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Mary Ann Beck: Mr. Bennion, would you spell your name?

Rex Bennion: Rex Bennion.

MB: Where were you born?

RB: I was born in Murray, Utah.

MB: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

RB: I've lived here five years come August 1, 1977.

MB: How old are you?

RB: I'm 47.

MB: Do you have a family?

RB: Yes, I have six children and a wife.

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

RB: All seven of us. One boy was in Guatemala at the time.

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

RB: It's about 2 ½ miles west of Rexburg on Highway 88, Route 1.

MB: What is your present address?

RB: Still the same.

MB: What do you do for a living?

RB: I'm the Dean of Administration at Ricks College.

MB: Did you own your own home?

RB: Yes, I'm purchasing my own home.

MB: Did you support or oppose the construction of the Teton Dam.

RB: I wasn't here at the time it was being proposed, but if I were asked now I would have supported it.

MB: Why?

RB: Because I believe the farmers in this area need the irrigation. It's also an important flood control measure for the Teton River.

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

RB: No, we hadn't even thought of it.

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

RB: We were at home. I was putting in sidewalks and my wife and family were working in the yard.

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

RB: A neighbor came over and told me that he'd heard it on the radio. I didn't believe it at first. It didn't take me long to accept it after I went in and turned on the radio.

MB: Did you try and save any household items?

RB: No, actually my wife was in a bigger hurry to get out than I was. I sent her and the children up on the hill while I went out in the pasture and caught my two horses and led them up to the hill behind the truck. That's the only thing we tried to save.

MB: Did you see the flood coming?

RB: I saw the flood coming from the Ricks College campus. I was up on top of the Manwaring Center, with glasses, and watched it come across the valley.

MB: Would you like to describe it?

RB: I suppose it was almost unreal. It was as if a big sea of mud was moving slowly across the valley and it was difficult to associate it with reality. I saw houses floating, animals running in front of the water and a number of things that you'd expect to see in a movie, but not in real life.

MB: What was the color of the water?

RB: It was brown.

MB: What were the attitudes of the people up on the hill?

RB: There was almost a carnival atmosphere at that point. I think everybody was watching it and not realizing the destruction of it. I think it was rather a gay and unrealistic attitude on the part of the people until they actually started realizing what the effect was.

MB: When you heard that the Teton Dam had failed, what preparations did you take to save your property?

RB: Very little except for catching the horses and leading them up on the hill.

MB: In vacating the area where you lived, tell what happened to you and your family.

RB: I had a car there without a battery and had just gone down that morning and purchased a new one. It wasn't in the car yet and so my wife tried to talk me into leaving the car there. I persuaded her that I was going to put the battery in the car which only took five minutes. I had one of the children drive the car. We also had her sister's car here. Within fifteen to twenty minutes, after we heard of the break, we left our place.

MB: What time was that?

RB: About noon.

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

RB: No, I don't think so. I can't recall anything that was miraculous except that we were fortunate enough to have our family all together at that time. Many were spilt and they didn't know where each other were.

MB: When you saw the animals trying to escape the floodwaters, would you like to describe their behavior?

RB: Yes, I had field glasses and I could see them. They were just running frantically in front of the water. Sometimes you'd see them turn and run right into it. It would roll them end-over-end and it was quite a spectacle. I could see dozens of animals trying to keep in front of the floodwater.

MB: Could you estimate how many?

RB: There was probably a hundred of them in front of the wake at the time I was watching.

MB: Where did you and your family stay during the first two or three days after the flood?

RB: We stayed in the college dorms for about ten days until they were able to restore water and power in our home.

MB: Did you stay there for the cleanup?

RB: We stayed at home after the ten days were over. We were just beginning the major cleanup. We stayed at our home. It was warm enough as long as we had water and power for the pump. We stayed there during the cleanup and slept there.

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

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

RB: We went the long way through Burton and got back on a road that had about two feet of water still on it. With my truck we were able to get through. One thing I forgot to mention, President Eyring and I had a chance to go up in a helicopter on Sunday. We went out and hovered over the house so I knew that it was still intact. We were pleased that the house was still there. I think that was the main thing. Out of about twelve homes in my area, six of them were completely destroyed. We were happy that ours was still on its foundation.

MB: How many feet of water was at your home?

RB: I would say it was about five to six deep on the level and that means it had six to eight inches into the living area upstairs. The basement was completely full.

MB: What was your first reaction after seeing the destruction?

RB: I suppose it the idea of getting to work. We got shovels and boots and went to work thinking that it would be a lot easier to cleanup than it turned out to be. We thought that within a week or two we'd have everything done. After I got the garage cleaned out, we started on the house. I found that we had to start carrying carpets out. We had only been in the house for two months prior to the flood. It was a brand new home completely carpeted and furnished. After we got the carpets up, the floors began to buckle and I had to go through and take all those up. It was a long process. We lived in the house for about three months without a board or carpeting on the floor. We were waiting to get the work done.

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

RB: My pictures that I had taken in Europe, while I was there in the service, were damaged. When I view them now, they are all muddy and difficult to make out.

MB: What did you think about and how did you feel as you watched the floodwaters rolling through the area?

RB: I live right on the Teton River so I knew that we would get hit one way or another. I thought my home would be worse than it was. I own property right against the river. My horses were there and I was concerned about them. I suppose it came through there forty and fifty feet deep because of its lower elevation. I expected that the house would receive more damage than it did. It was bad, but I had visitors of worse destruction. I spent the first two or three days up with the county commissioners and the civil defense director, as a representative of Ricks College, trying to help with the restoration. I heard them describe the destruction before I got to see my house. I knew it was bad before I got there.

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

RB: Many of my relatives came up and they helped get our basement cleaned up. Ricks College allowed all their people to take weeks off. Although I was involved in my own problems, I came up every day in the morning to help with decisions concerning Ricks College's involvement. For those two weeks, I went home and worked until midnight every night with my wife and family.

MB: What were some of the problems that you were confronted with that gave you the most frustration?

RB: The most frustrating thing was that everybody was busy. All the technical people that could tell me how to handle the electrical problems and water problems were so busy that you had a hard time getting decisions made. Most of those things I did myself. I think the frustrating thing was that there was no help for technical advice for a while. After a couple of weeks, we started getting electrical motors and with the water supplies.

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

RB: Yes, from my relatives and some volunteers from Utah that came up with the church. They helped us for a couple of days to get our bedrooms done in the basement.

MB: Have you had any unusual or uplifting experience during the cleanup operation?

RB: I don't think they were unusual. I learned the value of people's assistance. Many times I was so tired I couldn't lift a shovel. People came in and helped. They told me to sit down and rest. I think I learned the value of helping others that needed help.

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

RB: No, there was no vandalism at my place.

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

RB: Before the Bishop's Storehouse got organized, the Red Cross helped us get some mattresses. That was the immediate help that we received.

MB: Did you receive any assistance from the LDS or other church groups after the flood?

RB: No, I think not. We did eat and sleep at the college.

MB: What government agency did you deal with during the recovery operations?

RB: The Small Business Administration and the Bureau of Reclamation in filing a claim.

MB: How about HUD?

RB: There was a time or two I wondered about calling on HUD to come up and help with some of the problems like our water heater and electrical problems, but I was never able to contact them. I did it all myself.

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

RB: No.

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

RB: No, I don't know of any cases like that.

MB: Without divulging names, do you know of anyone who filed fraudulent flood claims?

RB: No, I don't know of anyone.

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

RB: I think it was a man-made disaster.

MB: Why?

RB: I think that man made a mistake when they designed the dam. At least all of the studies that we know of indicate such. If you went to sleep at the wheel of a car and you don't obey the laws of nature, you suffer the consequences and that's what happened here.

MB: Do you feel the dam should be rebuilt? If so, should it be rebuilt in the same place?

RB: I think it should be rebuilt. I would want to be assured by competent people that the same place is the proper site. If there are problems associated with at that site, then I'd like to see them change the site. I would like to see the dam rebuilt, however.

MB: How was the Teton disaster changed your life?

RB: I don't know if it's changed my life, but I think it's changed my attitude towards a few things. I've learned that material possessions are short-lived under certain circumstances. The most important thing is your family. True values of life came forth in that instant more than any other.

MB: What was your role in the Volunteer Appreciation Day on the 4th of June.

RB: I was the chairman of a committee that was called to organized an effort to express appreciation to volunteers that came up during this disaster.

MB: What brought about a day like this?

RB: Last February, the Chamber of Commerce was meeting of which I was a member. They started talking about the need to have some kind of a day where we could express appreciation. Actually, the initial thought was what should we do at the first anniversary of the flood. Everyone agreed that they didn't want to celebrate the flood. The idea came that we ought to spend some time expressing appreciation to all the people and agencies that helped during the flood. I was appointed chairman of the committee and I suggested that we call different members who represented interested parties. We called men who represented the county commissioners, the city council, the LDS Church and we had two men from Ricks College publicity department help us publicize it.

We began planning in March for a day in June to celebrate this affair. We planned for two or three months to put on a day where we could call back people who assisted, volunteers, and express to them our appreciation on that day. We had all been so busy over the last year, that we really had not taken the opportunity to express this appreciation. This gave the people, of this area, an opportunity to do that. We got nationwide coverage on that day. We had press here from New York, NBS, Los Angeles, and the northwest. Newspapers from all over the country were here to write stories about Volunteer Appreciation Day and what had happened over the last year since the Teton Dam disaster. We felt that there were probably three or four thousand people that came into Rexburg to celebrate that day with us. We felt that there were probably three or four thousand people that came into Rexburg to celebrate that day with us. We felt that with the coverage that was received throughout the country, the purpose was achieved. The purpose being to let people know that we hadn't forgotten them and that we did appreciate the many thousands of hours that were put in for the benefit of this valley.

It was estimated that there were over a million man-hours of volunteer work done here. If the United States Government had to pay for this work, it would have cost them over ten million dollars. This was all done by church groups, mostly Latter-Day Saints or Mormons, but also many other groups that came in and helped. It was a great factor in the recovery of this valley from the flood.

You may be interested in some of the events of Volunteer Appreciations Day. I'll just list the schedule here to give you an idea of what we did.

- At 9:00 in the morning, we began bus tours of the flood area and took them up to the Teton Dam to give them an idea of what happened during the last year of recovery. Many of the people were brought here and put directly in the basements of people and they never did get to see the dam or view the area. We found this to be one of the major attractions of the day. A number of times during the day we had ten buses out at a time and often had long lines waiting to take these tours.
- At 9:30 we began exhibits in the field house, at Ricks College, where many agencies put on films or other demonstrations showing the flood or their activities during the flood. This was interesting to many people and some spent an hour to an hour-and-a-half just viewing the exhibits.
- At 11:00 and at 4:30 in the afternoon, we had the 25th Army Band here and they gave concerts.
- At noon, in Porter Park, which is one of our main parks here in town, we served box lunches.
- At 1:30, we had a general assembly where some of the prominent people, involved in the disaster, spoke to the audience. Some of those were: Hugh Fowler of the Federal Disaster Assistance, the director of the whole federal program; President Eyring of Ricks College; Representative George Hansen, US Congressman; two US Senators, James McClure and Frank Church; and Governor Evans. All of these people spoke and commended the people of this valley for their recovery efforts and for the progress that had been made over the last year. Keith Higgenson, the president Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation and Bishop Richard Clark of the Presiding Bishopric with the General Authorities of the church, also spoke. Frank Church had a special message from President Carter which he read. I think the over-all impression of this meeting was extremely interesting. It expressed to the people of this area, the valor and courage that they showed. This was done by men who had been disasters all over the country. This meeting lasted for about 2 1/2 hours, but was a highlight of the day.
- At 5:00, a barbecue was offered free in Porter Park for anyone that would come. We think we served about 7,500 people. It was a beautiful day so people just

enjoyed sitting around the park, visiting and getting reacquainted with their friends and visitors from outside the area.

- That evening there was a concert put on by a musical group entitled Sun, Shade and Rain. This kind of capped off the day.

There were a lot of thing to do, from all reports, those who participated in this day were pleased with the results. We felt like the purpose, for expressing appreciation to volunteers, was accomplished.

MB: Were you the representative of President Eyring that opened the doors to Ricks College for the people of the valley?

RB: President Eyring was in Idaho Falls at the time of the flood and they would not let him back through the blockade until the next day. The person who made the first announcement that people could come to Ricks College, was Gary Olsen. He is the Manwaring Center or student center director. They announced it over the air that Ricks College could serve this purpose. I was the first member of the President's staff to arrive at the college and as thousands of people started flooding in, there were decisions to be made about where to put them and what to do with them. Shortly, after Mack Shirley, the Dean of Student Life, arrived we decided to begin assigning housing. We knew that many people would not have a place to stay that night. We spent most of our evening assigning people to housing. By 10:30 p.m. we had 2,000 people housed in the dorms. Food Services is under my direction so I instructed Pat Price, the food services director, to put together some soup or something to start feeding the hungry families. By six or seven that evening everyone had been fed and things had quieted down.

There were a number of things that had to be done. We started a "mission persons" list which got as high as 300 people at one time. It listed people who were hunting for their mates, their children, or who were separated when they got the news about the disaster. We started movies and tried to calm people down. There was a lot of excitement. There were a lot of children who were crying and there was a lot of confusion that evening before we finally got things done. As far as I know, by 10:30 that night there was no one who didn't have a place to stay or a place to sleep. All of our dorms were filled. We tried to judge the size of the family with the dorm rooms. A lot of the people were only there for two or three weeks, but some stayed three months.

I was designated as the official Ricks College representative to work with the county commissioners and the civil defense director. I spent many hours in meetings with them to coordinate the activities here on the campus with what they were doing. Ricks College was able to perform many functions because of the facilities we had and the skills that many of our people possessed. As a result, I think Ricks College played a major part in the initial stages of recovery.

As people started getting back on their own feet again, they began moving out. President Eyring came back the next day and was pleased with the role that we were playing. In

fact, he carried it on beyond to a greater extent. There were a few days, right at the beginning, where we served as many as 30,000 meals in one day. I remember one day we put together 10,000 box lunches which went to different locations where people were working.

For the first three months we were serving as many as ten to thirty thousand meals a day. Most of this food, after the first three or four days, was furnished by the Latter-Day Saint Church Welfare system. Ricks College had an inventory for two or three days. Between the agencies mentioned, we provided quite an eating facility here for an extended period of time.

I suppose one of the major problems we had was keeping the buildings, particularly the Manwaring Center, clean and ready for the next meal. Our Food Service people worked around the clock to provide food; our custodial people performed the same way. It was such a massive task to cleanup behind eight to ten thousand people who were tracking dust through the Manwaring Center. Our staff really provided a monumental service to this community.

MB: Do you think it was a good learning experience?

RB: Yes, there was a lot of lessons learned from this experience. I'd never want to repeat it to learn the lessons, but inasmuch as it happened, we had no choice. Many of us gained a great deal that will help us in future years. I think that everyone learned something from that experience.

MB: Do you think it was a good missionary tool?

RB: All churches probably worked together through this experience better than any other experience I can remember. Therefore, I believe that non-members of the church gained an appreciation for friendship and the assistance that the church provided. If someday a missionary knocked on their door and asked them to listen to their message they probably would be more inclined to do so than they would have prior to this experience.

MB: Do you think it was a dry run for something bigger in our lives?

RB: None of us can predict what's going to happen in the future except for what the scriptures say. The times ahead aren't going to be easy and the world is becoming ripe with iniquity. There'll be a number of things that we'll go through in this life that will simulate what we've experienced. Yes, I think it was a good dry run. I'm not hoping for anything in the future that would be like this, but I hope the things that I learned, during this disaster, would be helpful in assisting us to overcome catastrophes in the future. I think that it was a valuable experience, but we could have done without it. Inasmuch as we were faced with it, we were able to handle it.

MB: Thank you very much.

