

Unforgettable Flood: Thirty Years Ago Today, the Teton Dam Broke

(by Kendra Evensen, Post Register Newspaper, 5 June 2006, Page A1)

REXBURG — The Bureau of Reclamation started building the Teton Dam in 1972 after mulling and investigating the idea for more than 70 years.

The dam, located three miles northeast of Newdale, was a symbol of promise to many.

It meant more water for farmers and their thirsty fields in the Henry's Fork valley. It meant flood control for the Teton River, which often lapped over its bank in the spring. It meant 16,000 more kilowatts of power and a place to recreate.

That's not to say the project wasn't controversial.

Some worried how such a structure would weather an earthquake, or that it wasn't safe given the makeup of the soil and land around it.

But their concerns were overwhelmed by the excitement for the project.

By June 1976, the \$85,676,000 dam was nearly complete. It stood 305 feet high and 3,100 feet wide, and was filling at a rate of 3 feet per day.

But the dam never reached its capacity.

On June 3, two streams appeared down river. The next day, another stream was found closer by. At 7:45 a.m. June 5, a leak was discovered on the dam itself, and it began moving up the slope.

There was a concerted effort to stop it. Bulldozers tried to fill the widening hole with earth and plug a whirlpool that was forming, until two of the machines fell in. Thirty minutes later, at 11:57 a.m., the dam broke.

Two hundred and seventy feet of water drained within six hours. The wave — which wasn't contained until American Falls, about 80 miles away — caused landslides and chewed up homes, animals, cars, trees — anything in its path.

The water devastated areas such as Wilford, Sugar City, and Rexburg.

Thirty years later, the cause of the dam's collapse remains a mystery, but the event has left a permanent mark.

The way the Bureau of Reclamation builds dams changed, the way water flows through eastern Idaho changed, and most significantly, the lives of thousands of residents changed.

The Dam Is Breaking

George Olson was the supervisor of the Targhee National Forest in June 1976.

He didn't believe his daughter when she rushed into their St. Anthony home and told him the dam was breaking. Not until he heard the radio announcer urging people to evacuate.

"I heard the terror in his voice and I knew this was bad. He was telling people to run for their lives," he said. "(Then) I knew this was no sham; this was the real thing."

He contacted the Fremont County sheriff to offer the U.S. Forest Service's equipment, personnel, and horses for rescue efforts, but he felt helpless. He could see a rolling dust cloud in front of a wall of water between St. Anthony and Sugar City and knew there was little time to react.

"It raged through, and we had to deal with the aftermath," he said.

That included rounding up scattered livestock, setting up communications to coordinate relief efforts and helping families find their missing loved ones. It also meant comforting those such as a fire dispatcher whose son was fishing in the river below the dam earlier that morning.

"He was confident his son had been killed, and it turned out he was," Olson said.

He knew the flood would cause mass devastation and dozens of deaths.

"I thought it would be much greater than it was. It was a great relief," he said. "There could have been hundreds killed."

Watching the Wave

Rexburg resident Louis Clements, his wife, and three children evacuated to the Ricks College campus, where many people were gathering. He threw some sleeping bags and his wife's cosmetics into a camper shell.

He didn't think the water would really threaten his home (he guessed 1 or 2 feet might seep in), but he piled 2 feet of dirt in front of the door before he left, just in case. From the campus, he saw the water coming.

"I could see (the wave) as it came by. I could see it hit the house," he said. "The house didn't float away, but there were trailers floating along."

A large stone granary split the wave just before it hit Clements' home. The granary was demolished, he said, and his home was damaged, too. A log crashed through the den window, and two sprinkler lines wrapped around the house. The first floor of the two-story home took on water and 18 inches of mud.

He lives in the same home today, but at the time, restoration seemed futile.

“It looked totally impossible,” he said.

Cleaning Up

Rexburg resident Orrin Bates returned to his home a few days after it was hit by the wall of water. He was one of the first in his neighborhood to return.

Before evacuating his house, Bates had taken items stored in the basement and put them in trash cans on the main floor to protect them.

“I didn’t think it would get deep enough, but (the water) tipped all the stuff over,” he said.

The basement was brimming with water; the upstairs took on another 12 to 14 inches.

“We went right back and lived in it — that was a mistake,” he said. “It took so long to clean up, and you were right in the middle of it all the time. You couldn’t get away from it.”

He remembers pulling carpets out of his home and placing them on wood blocks. He sprayed them with water but couldn’t get the mud out. He tossed out most of the carpets.

Cooking for Thousands

Martell Grover, a National Guardsman, was called to active duty and cooked meals at Ricks College while other members of his battalion were repairing roads and bridges.

He worked every day from 5 a.m. to mid afternoon.

The college, backed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, served 386,000 free meals for three months. Cooks made sandwiches every hour for workers and others.

“They came to clean up, get a hot, nourishing meal, and get back to work,” he said.

Boosting Morale

It wasn’t easy to walk into your home and realize you lost everything. Many joked about it at first — store owners declared mud-covered merchandise on sale — but it wasn’t easy to keep smiling in the wake of so much devastation.

It took months for many to get their lives back to normal and as much as a year for others. Many lived in campus housing until students returned in the fall. Then they moved into trailers supplied by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

As many as 32,000 volunteers helped boost morale, Clements said. Farmers donated pumping equipment to get houses cleaned out.

“They were the saving grace of the whole community, along with other volunteers,” he said.

Miners who were laid off in Colorado came to help out, too, cutting away the sprinkler pipes surrounding his home.

Some Sugar City residents were invited to a picnic in Ammon. Though it was a nice event, Glenn Dalling remembers most the luxury of seeing grass again.

“There sure wasn’t any in Sugar City,” he said.

Thirty Years Later

Last week, about 50 people gathered at the Rexburg Tabernacle Civic Center to commemorate what Clements calls the second largest devastation in Idaho (the first being a mining disaster).

They recalled miracles — such as the influx of seagulls that arrived within a week of the flood to devour mosquito larva. And they poked a little fun — such as the fashion show comprised of clothes given to the victims.

“It’s not traumatic for me anymore, personally. I’m glad I was a part of it,” Clements said. “I learned that if something happens, I can rise above it, (though) at first I shook my head and wondered.”
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The Wave

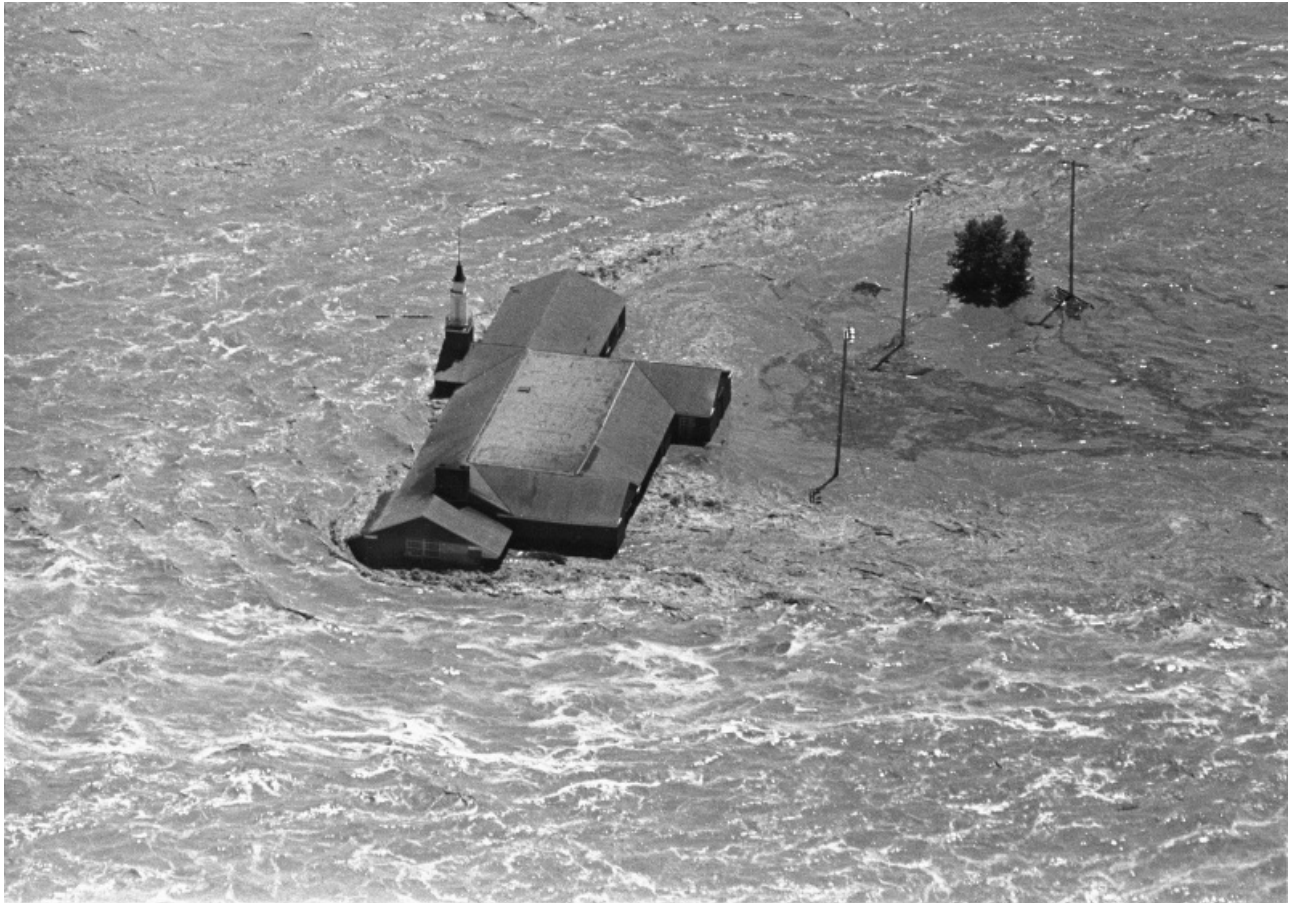
- There were 80 billion gallons of water released when the Teton Dam broke.
- The flood was as much as seven miles wide and covered 300 square miles.
- The water was 8 to 10 feet high as far as Rexburg.

(Sources: The Bureau of Reclamation Web site and the Teton Flood Museum)

The Toll

- Eleven people were killed; six drowned.
- Between 16,000 and 20,000 animals died.
- Twenty-five thousand people were left homeless.
- One hundred thousand acres of agriculture were disrupted — 3,000 permanently.

(Source: Louis Clements)



(Sitting like a stone in a stream, a church deflects the waters from the failed Teton Dam on June 5, 1976. Just a few mile northeast of Rexburg, the village of Wilford was almost totally destroyed.)



(The flood waters of the Teton Dam start to recede in downtown Rexburg in June 1976.)