

YM/YW Service Project at the Teton Dam Disaster in 1976
Our volunteers worked in Sugar City, Idaho, staying in tents there,
and then were able to go and shower at BYU-Idaho housing in Rexburg.
We stopped at Lava Hot Springs on the way home.



DESERET NEWS, MONDAY, MAY 30, 1977

Teton volunteers will be saluted

By David Croft
Deseret News staff writer

REXBURG, Idaho — M. Rex Bennion leaned forward in his chair in his Ricks College office, placed his arms on his desk and said, "We'd still be digging out if it weren't for the volunteers who came up here."

One year ago Sunday, on June 5, 1976, the Teton Dam broke, sending billions of gallons of water roaring downstream to destroy Sugar City, parts of Rexburg and other communities before continuing south to flood Firth, Roberts, Blackfoot and surrounding farmland.

Bennion, dean of administration at the college, heads a steering committee in charge of volunteer appreciation day June 4.

Volunteer appreciation day is not to remember the flood — most people want to forget it — but to honor the thousands of volunteers who poured in from the rest of Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and other places and helped flood victims dig out of the mud, muck and despair.

"There was an awful lot of people coming and going," Bennion said, "up to 2,000 people in a day."

Elder Mark G. Ricks, a regional representative in Rexburg for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a member of the volunteer appreciation day committee, said, "When we first started talking about this volunteer appreciation day, some people didn't understand. They thought we wanted to celebrate the flood. They wanted to forget."

However, he said, when people understood that the celebration was to honor

volunteers, they became enthusiastic about the idea. "We hope that it will be a nice occasion," he said.

"Some people ask: Why are you celebrating the flood?" said Ferron W. Sonderegger, president of the Rexburg Idaho North Stake of the LDS Church. "Well, it isn't to celebrate the flood; it's to honor some great people."

To most people, the dam's failure is ancient history, said J. Kent Marlor, Madison County Civil Defense operations director. "People are looking forward to appreciation day."

Madison County Commission Chairman Keith W. Walker said some volunteers found more than debris when they came to help. "There are people moving in, some who came in to help and liked the area."

Commissioner Walker also pointed to a lessening of problems. A series of meetings to coordinate efforts of various agencies working in the county, held daily after the flood, dropped to weekly. Meetings are now held monthly.

Of a recent meeting he said, "This is the first meeting we had that we didn't have problems to discuss." The chief item on the agenda was ensuring that everyone possible had an invitation to volunteer appreciation day.

Officials of various organizations in Madison County have invited federal, state and other officials. Invitations went to former President Gerald R. Ford, President Jimmy Carter, Secy. of Interior Cecil B. Andrus, Idaho Gov. John Evans, Bureau of Reclamation Director Keith Higginson and National Red Cross President Art Kross.

Idaho's congressional delegation plans to attend, as does Bishop J. Richard Clarke, second counselor in the LDS Church Presiding Bishopric.

Flood victims were asked to invite the volunteers who helped them, but a general invitation through the news media has been issued to any volunteer to join the celebration.

"We don't know how many to expect," said Bennion. He said the dinner is being planned for 10,000, "but there may be 30,000."

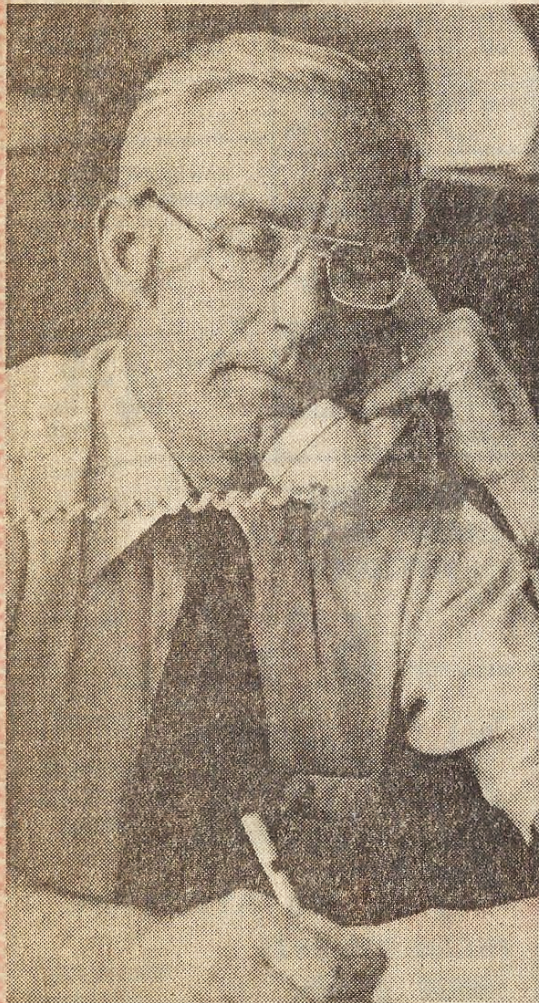
The celebration will begin at 9 a.m. with guided bus tours of the flood area and the dam site. The tours will start regularly throughout the day at Ricks College.

At 9:30 a.m. a series of exhibits will open in the Ricks College fieldhouse. Displays will be presented by the Bureau of Reclamation, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Red Cross, National Guard, Utah Power & Light Co., the college and other groups. The exhibits will be open all day.

Another all-day event will be a carnival in Porter Park in Rexburg. Highlights will include concerts by the 25th Army Band at 11 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Officials responding to invitations will meet at 1:30 p.m. in the Hart Building auditorium on campus.

At noon, box lunches will be offered to celebrants. Bennion said the fee for the lunch will be \$1. The dinner at 5 p.m. in the park will be free.

After the dinner, at 7 and 9 p.m., a musical group, "Sun, Shade and Rain," which has been popular with family audiences in the area, will present a program, Bennion said.



"We'd still be digging out if it weren't for the volunteers," M. Rex Bennion says.





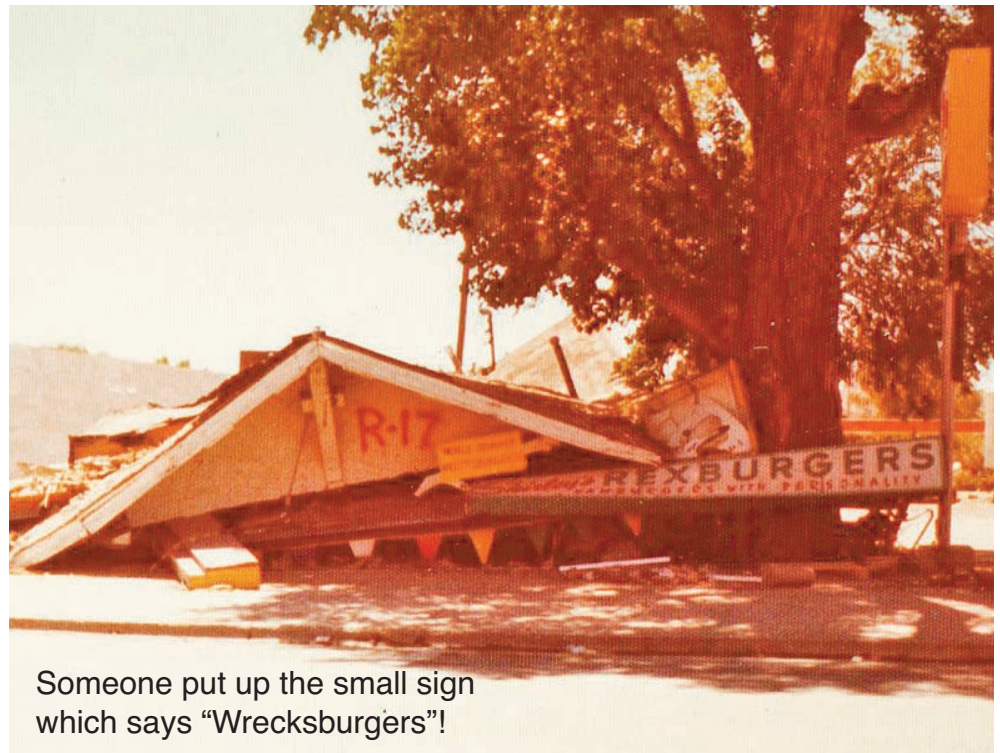
Katie Durfee



This is the family whose house we stayed at, shown in the photo below this.

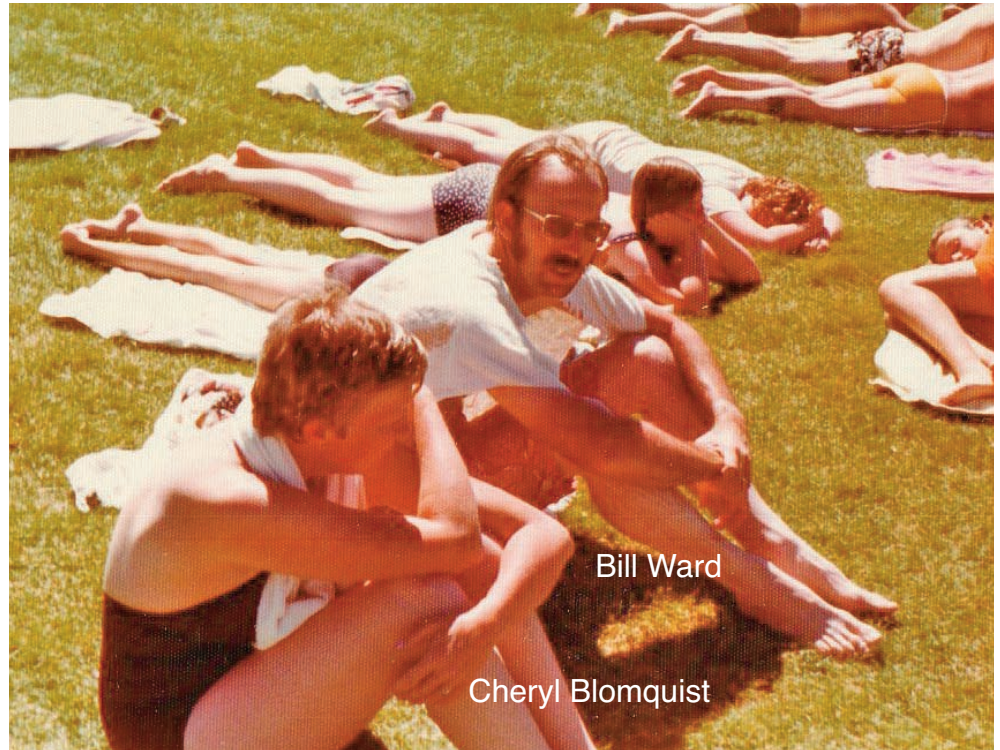






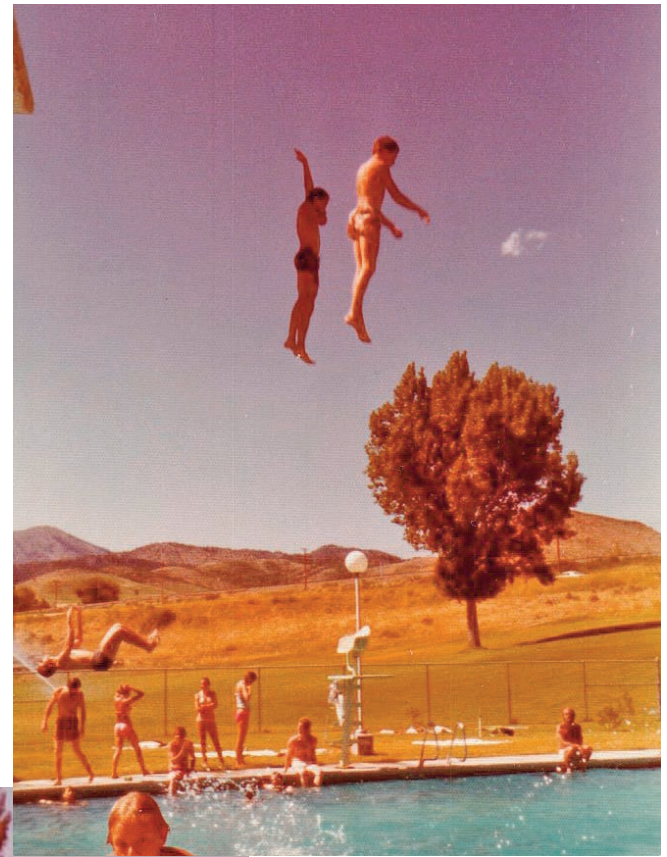
Someone put up the small sign which says "Wrecksburgers"!





Bill Ward

Cheryl Blomquist



A leak, then deluge: Remembering the Teton Dam collapse

By LUKE RAMSETH and BRYAN CLARK Post Register
Published: June 12, 2016 06:13PM
Updated: June 11, 2016 09:33AM

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho • Phone lines were knocked out. Highways were blocked. What eastern Idaho residents heard on June 5, 1976, over the only reliable form of immediate communication — the radio airwaves — was incomprehensible.

"The dam has busted," Don Ellis said on Rexburg station KRXX.

As the world soon learned, the 305-foot-high Teton Dam had broken in half. Its collapse sent a wall of water cascading through the Teton River canyon, north of the town of Newdale in Fremont County. Downstream, with no canyon to contain it, the flood fanned out for miles across the Snake River Plain. The water turned south, gobbling up cattle, cars and homes on its slow march to Idaho Falls and beyond.

Forty years later, many eastern Idaho residents vividly recall the chaos set in motion that sunny Saturday morning, the Post Register reported. Eleven people died and thousands more were displaced in the flood, considered the worst man-made disaster in Idaho history. Crops were ruined and thousands of cattle were killed. Total damage estimates hit up to \$2 billion — \$8.4 billion in today's dollars.

And almost nobody saw it coming. In fact, when most people heard initial reports of the collapse, they refused to believe it.

"Naturally, I thought it was a hoax of some kind," said John C. Porter, then-mayor of Rexburg, in a Mormon church oral history. "We had lived in the shadows of dams for years in Idaho, and nothing had ever happened."

ON THE SCENE OF THE COLLAPSE • The Teton Dam had been finished for less than a year when it collapsed. Its 17-mile-long reservoir was nearly full.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation billed the dam project as a way to control spring runoff and offer more consistent water supply to farmers during the summer months. Instead, it caused chaos.

The first hints of trouble came as the new reservoir continued to fill in the early days of June. An inspection team on June 3 noticed water seeping from the ground at several locations downstream from the dam. At 7 a.m. June 5, the day of the collapse, workers noticed the first seep on the dam face itself. By mid-morning, a large wet spot had formed.

Jay Calderwood, a heavy equipment operator, helped build the dam. At 10:30 a.m. on June 5 he got a call at his Victor home. After racing to the scene, he drove a bulldozer onto the top of the dam to try and stem the leaking, according to an University and several foundations.

"I don't think we can stop it," Calderwood remembered thinking.

But he tried. A massive whirlpool had formed next to the dam, the water disappearing far beneath them. Along with other workers, Calderwood pushed boulders into the whirlpool to try and plug up the breach. Then they felt the dam shift beneath their tractors.

"We were backing across the dam and had the dozers in reverse when the dam fell through," he said. "It caved right in front of us. While we were backing away, we kept thinking it was going to cave behind us and take us with it. But it never did."



ADVANCE FOR RELEASE SATURDAY, JUNE 11, 2016, AT 12:01 A.M. MDT. - This June 1976, photo shows people cleaning up Sugar City, Idaho after the Teton Dam collapse. Forty years after the Teton Dam collapse, many eastern Idaho residents vividly recall the chaos set in motion that sunny Saturday morning. (Robert Bower/The Idaho Post-Register via AP) MANDATORY CREDIT

THE MAN WHO RODE THE FLOOD • Perhaps nobody had a closer view of the flood than Daryl Wayne Grigg, a sawmill worker from St. Anthony. Grigg recounted his story in 1977 for the Teton Oral History Program.

When the dam broke, Grigg was with his friend David Benson. They were fishing on a small island in the Teton River about two miles below the dam, a place they had visited many times before. "It was pretty good fishing," Grigg said.

Grigg and Benson had just set foot on the island when they noticed an airplane flying low overhead. The pilot was waving at them. They didn't recognize him but figured maybe they knew him. They waved back.

Suddenly, the river rose by 6 feet. Grigg looked upstream and saw a 30-foot-tall wall of water crashing down the canyon.

"I turned and yelled at David, telling him to jump in the river," Grigg told the Oral History Program. "That is what I did. We started swimming, but that didn't work. That was the last time I have seen David."

After a long struggle, Grigg popped to the surface of the raging torrent. He grabbed a log to stay afloat. He cursed then prayed. "I just figured it was all over with," he said.

As he floated downriver, Grigg heard the panicked cry of cattle and watched homes float off their foundations. His log slammed into another, breaking five of his ribs and puncturing a lung.

After a three-mile ride, Grigg managed to climb a cottonwood tree. He told the interviewer he didn't recall much after that. After four hours in the tree, he was rescued by friends in a boat. Benson wasn't so lucky: His body was later found about a quarter-mile from the cottonwood tree.

The interviewer asked Grigg whether he supported building the dam when its construction was being debated several years prior.

"I was for it," Grigg said. ". But I'm opposed to it now."

Recording the chaos from the air

In the Post Register newsroom, word of something big at Teton Dam trickled in around noon, Robert Bower, a former staff photographer, said in a recent interview. At first, nobody was sure whether to believe the sketchy phone and radio reports, he said.

But if the dam really was collapsing, Bower didn't want to miss the story. He chartered a private airplane from the Idaho Falls airport to ride to the scene. As Bower and the two pilots flew over Sugar City, there was no sign of floodwaters. But Bower spotted a plume of dust on the horizon.

Minutes later, as the plane took a pass over the dam itself, Bower leaned out an open window and started snapping pictures. Over the drone of the engine, he heard a secondary roar from far below — the sound of millions of gallons of water leaving the reservoir.

"The canyon was running deep with muddy water," he said. "The scale of it was truly amazing to see."

On the way back south, the plane caught up to the leading edge of the flood. Bower watched as the water, now several feet high, slowly engulfed fence posts, then cattle, and then Sugar City.

"It was coming fast," he said. "And the supply behind it was ever-increasing."

For Bower and other Post Register staffers, it was the first of many 15- to 18-hour work days covering the largest disaster the region had ever seen.

THE WATER CONTINUES SOUTH • Sugar City was essentially annihilated. The Post Register reported that 250 homes were destroyed, and those that remained were under 10 to 12 feet of water.

Then-mayor Lyle Moon was near the dam making petroleum deliveries when dispatchers told him of the collapse. He thought it was a joke.

"Tell me another one," he told his dispatcher.

Another 150 homes in the city of Teton were leveled, according to Post Register reporting. Trees were uprooted and carried away.

"Total devastation," was the way one reporter, Chris Dunagan, described it on the first day. "People are just shocked, standing around. They can't believe what's going on."

Farther south, Mark G. Ricks, president of the Rexburg Stake, would later tell church historians that word of the coming flood was spread through the city by police who had loudspeakers and neighbors going door to door.

"The vast majority of people moved out with just the clothes that were on their back," Ricks said.

Residents made their way to higher ground. They watched from the top of the Ricks College hill as brown water rolled into the city, flooding basements and sending floating houses crashing into trees. Ricks thought he might be dreaming.

Should Teton Dam be rebuilt?

The Associated Press

Published: October 11, 2009 12:34 am

This is an archived article that was published on sltrib.com in 2009, and information in the article may be outdated. It is provided only for personal research purposes and may not be reprinted.

Idaho Falls, Idaho » The departure of the Idaho Department of Water Resources director has complicated debate over resurrecting the Teton Dam, which failed spectacularly in 1976.

Dave Tuthill, a big advocate of raising existing Idaho dams and building new ones to help store more water for all-too-common drought years, retired in June.

Hal Anderson, another official at the water office, told the Idaho Falls Post-Register his agency's level of commitment to Tuthill's policies isn't certain now that Tuthill is no longer in charge.

Still, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter is on record as a supporter of new water projects to boost storage capacity.

When the Teton Dam failed 33 years ago, it killed 11 people and thousands of cattle downstream. Any proposal by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation or another government agency to try again is likely to be met with concern from residents of eastern Idaho who fear a repeat disaster.

"I think that most people just didn't believe it was going to happen, and yet it was happening," he said. "And we sat there and watched it, and still didn't believe it was true."

Ricks worked with the Mormon church to organize relief efforts, bringing food from church storehouses in Ucon and Salt Lake City.

The dormitories at Ricks College became temporary shelter for beleaguered residents. At one point, its cafeteria served 30,000 meals in one day.

The next day, Main Street was under 5 feet of water. Cleanup and recovery would take months. While hundreds of millions in reparations would be paid by the Bureau of Reclamation to the residents of Sugar City and Rexburg, it was cold comfort for many.

"We wouldn't trade that town of Sugar City, and they wouldn't trade their town of Rexburg, for all the money they've got back in Washington, D.C.," Lyle Moon said.

A COMMUNITY EFFORT IN IDAHO FALLS • In Idaho Falls, the water wouldn't reach its peak on the Snake River until Sunday, which gave officials and residents time to prepare. First, it rose to the point that the city's signature waterfalls disappeared. Then, the water began to flow over the Broadway Bridge.

To save the bridge, residents took drastic measures. They cut a 40-foot wide canal through Broadway to the west of the bridge. Throughout town, residents filled sandbags to save low-lying buildings near the river.

Everybody pitched in, then-City Councilman Mel Erickson said in an interview last year. There were sandbag assembly lines, and residents brought their pickup trucks and dump trucks to help in the effort.

"It really united the town," Erickson said.

But some things couldn't be saved. The wall of water ruined the city's three hydropower plants on the Snake River. The plants were eventually replaced, funded with \$96 million in bond money that wasn't paid down until last year.

One of the most famous photographs from the disaster was taken just as a wave of water breached the Broadway Bridge.

Bower said he had been standing next to the bridge for a time on June 6, watching as the water steadily rose. He sidled up to a police officer who was preventing anyone from crossing.

"I said, 'I've got to go out on that bridge, and take a few pictures.' He said, 'I'm not supposed to let you out there, but I'll look the other way for 30 seconds.'"

Bower ran onto the bridge as water poured over the road surface. He could feel the structure vibrating beneath his feet. "You didn't want to stay out there," he said.

But the risk was worth it.

"That was the picture that summed it up," he said.

Note: Special thanks to the Special Collections Department at Brigham Young University-Idaho for access to church oral histories and Teton Oral History Project resources.