

DAM MORMONS: RESPONDING TO THE 1976 TETON DAM DISASTER IN THE  
“LORD’S WAY”

by

LauriAnn Vaterlaus Deaver

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History  
Boise State University

December 2013

© 2013

LauriAnn Vaterlaus Deaver

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

**DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS**

of the thesis submitted by

LauriAnn Vaterlaus Deaver

Thesis Title: Dam Mormons: Responding to the 1976 Teton Dam Disaster in the  
“Lord’s Way”

Date of Final Oral Examination: 23 October 2013

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student LauriAnn Vaterlaus Deaver, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Lisa Brady, Ph.D. Chair, Supervisory Committee

John Bieter, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

Barton Barbour, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Lisa Brady, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As my thesis process finally ends, I wish to express my gratitude to the chair of my thesis committee and academic advisor, Dr. Lisa Brady. Dr. Brady wildly exceeded my expectations as an advisor by painstakingly reading multiple drafts of this thesis, mentoring me in the field of Environmental History during several different readings and conference sections, and sharing with me her vast knowledge and passion as an historian. She frequently sacrificed her time and energy to encourage my academic development, for which I will always be grateful.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Barton Barbour and Dr. John Bieter. I feel fortunate to have secured the input of two skillful writers. I appreciate Dr. Barbour's insights that assisted me in elevating my prose and style allowing me to express my thoughts and arguments in a more effective format. I found working with Dr. Bieter very rewarding. His teaching style allowed me the confidence to adopt my own style of historical analysis and permitted me to feel self-assured in my writing.

The Boise State University History Department supported my thesis research through a department grant, enabling me to immerse myself for weeks in everything related to the Teton Dam. I also wish to thank Dr. Jill Gill, who originally served on my committee and provided me with several potential avenues to pursue on the religious aspects of my topic. Dr. Gill is also the best lecturer and discussion leader I have ever encountered and left me spellbound each week I had the privilege to attend her class. Dr.

Todd Shallat, Dr. Lynn Lubamersky, and Dr. David Walker also contributed to my academic career at Boise State. I served as their teaching assistant and valued the time they spent with me to teach me their respective philosophies regarding education at the university level. The history department supplied me with many excellent mentors.

I also wish to thank Brigham Young University-Idaho Special Collections staff. They were courteous, excited, and helpful in guiding me through their fascinating Teton Dam collection. They also allowed me to copy and scan everything to my heart's content without charging a cent.

My parents and siblings exhibited a lot of support during my time at Boise State University. They endured many zealous descriptions of my subject matter and several “dam” related puns. I am grateful for the encouragement I received from my children, Madison, Hayes, and Pierce. I am so thrilled that they are already showing an interest in history! I also want to express my gratitude to my husband Joe. He watched our children without complaint while I went on research trips, worked in the library, or barricaded myself in our room to write. He even made the ultimate personal sacrifice and was one of my final editors.

Finally, my graduate school experience would have been wasted had I not befriended Anna, Luke, and Keegan. Our after class discussions and off-campus adventures made my graduate school experience enjoyable and amusing. Having peers who enjoy discussing books, historical events, and the idiosyncrasies of academia is one of the most rewarding feelings I have experienced. GoF forever!

## ABSTRACT

The June 5, 1976, Teton Dam collapse occurred in a unique region of Idaho where the population comprised as much as ninety-five percent of residents belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The homogenous nature of this population influenced the nature of the recovery effort following the disaster. The Teton Dam recovery effort provided an opportunity for the LDS church, using its welfare system and priesthood (lay male leadership) organizational structure to seamlessly work with government agencies. Church leaders used the reports of positive interactions between its members and the federal and local leaders to celebrate an effective assimilation of its principles into mainstream culture, even using distinctive aspects of Mormon culture and practice to enhance the government's recovery efforts. While the Teton Dam failure did encourage a previously unprecedented level of cooperation between the federal or local government and the LDS Church, this recovery effort also demonstrated an inability or unwillingness of the church to actually abandon its unique beliefs and procedures.

The dam collapse allowed for a potential point of change in a larger narrative of Mormon history noted by mutual antagonism between the church and government. This change is a matter of perception by members of the church and their leadership during the late 1970s. Much of the accommodation arose from the secular agencies that felt it easier to adapt to the LDS recovery approach rather than implement their own methods of organization. This environmental crisis provided an opportunity for the LDS Church in 1976 to display its beliefs and practices, which the federal government and mainstream

American culture had historically found objectionable. The recovery period provided an opportunity for the church to create a narrative based on its work following the collapse of the dam that showed the value of priesthood leadership, welfare system, communal spirit, and the doctrine of self-sufficiency.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: A “CONFLICT BETWEEN SOVEREIGNS” .....	12
CHAPTER 3: INSATIABLE WATER NEEDS, FAULTY GROUTING CURTAINS, AND THE SHORT LIFE OF THE TETON DAM .....	24
CHAPTER 4: MORMONISM IN TRANSITION .....	45
CHAPTER 5: MAINTAINING THE INDEPENDENCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF THE LDS CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS .....	53
CHAPTER 6: BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN PREISTHOOD AND CIVIL LEADERSHIP .....	72
CHAPTER 7: ORGANIZING AN ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS .....	87
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION .....	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	100



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The first Saturday of June, 1976, brought sunshine and warmth, drawing the people of the Upper Snake River Valley outside to enjoy the spring weather. Ferron W. Sonderegger, a resident of Sugar City, Idaho and a stake president in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the Rexburg North Stake, spent the morning working in his garden planting raspberries and strawberries. The little neighbor girls, Yvonne and Diane Bean, ran to the Sonderegger house finding the stake president on his knees in the garden and exclaimed, “Brother Sonderegger, the dam has broken. The Teton Dam has broken.” In disbelief Sonderegger told the girls that he thought they were only joking, but agreed to go next door where he heard a radio announcer implore his listeners to “Move out, the dam has broken. Don’t stop for anything. Move out.”<sup>1</sup>

Workers completed much of the construction on the Teton Dam shortly before an abnormally heavy spring thaw flooded into the new reservoir. They had yet to finish the spillway or river works outlet, which allowed engineers to control how much water the reservoir held. When workers fell slightly behind schedule on construction projects the delay only compounded other, more fundamental dam problems. The dam site utilized porous canyon walls riddled with large fissures that required a novel design approach. The site also resided in an area prone to frequent seismic activity that could jeopardize

---

<sup>1</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 42, MSS1 2, Teton Dam Collection, Brigham Young University-Idaho Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University-Idaho, Rexburg, Idaho.

the integrity of the dam. Eastern Idahoans and the Bureau of Reclamation debated for decades the necessity of a dam on the Teton River. This dam ultimately provided little additional irrigation water and flood control to an area that did not routinely suffer from severe flooding, making the necessity of taking such risks in the site and design a dubious choice for such a minor reward. The questionable site, the Bureau's inability to adequately address the challenges of the canyon walls in their design, and record level snowpack in 1975-76 came to a head on June 5 when the face of the dam suddenly collapsed and unleashed its reservoir on several eastern Idaho towns and communities.

The ensuing flood took eleven lives, inundated over 180 square miles, destroyed 771 homes, damaged 3,002 additional homes, and killed 16,650 livestock.<sup>2</sup> Flood victims in Sugar City, Rexburg, Wilford, Salem, and Hibbard found themselves homeless, possessing only the items that they quickly assembled before evacuating to higher ground. For many this meant only the clothes they wore that day. Poor understanding of the Teton River Canyon and arrogance on the part of the Bureau's design of the dam led to two billion dollars' worth of damage in one of the worst dam disasters in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The Teton Dam disaster occurred in an area of eastern Idaho where nearly ninety-five percent of the population claimed membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often referred to as Mormons) according to the 1976 LDS Church

---

<sup>2</sup> Wayne J. Graham, "The Teton Dam Failure—An Effective Warning and Evacuation" (paper presented at the Association of State Dam Safety Officials 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference, Indian Wells, California, September 7-11, 2008), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 407.

Historian Bruce D. Blumell.<sup>4</sup> The homogenous nature of the population involved in this disaster and its recovery effort provides an unprecedented modern look at Mormon interactions with the federal government. Hostility and mutual antagonism marked the relationship between the LDS Church and federal and local governments from the mid-nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century. This enmity played out on both a national and a local stage, primarily through legal battles involving polygamy and church owned businesses. Historians Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, in their work, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* argued that the twentieth century brought a certain amount of accommodation of American government and culture by the LDS Church. The church ended polygamy in 1890, divested itself of its controlling interest in many of its businesses, began participating in national political parties, and ended its cooperative economic systems. These changes to Mormonism ended most of the legal wrangling between the church and government. Arrington and Bitton concluded, “the church was, in effect, reoriented to incorporate the standards of social, political, and economic behavior imposed by American Society, while at the same time it attempted to retain as much of the ‘Kingdom’ outlook as possible.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prefers to be described using its full name rather than being called the Mormon Church. In this thesis, I will use the term Mormon Church because those outside the church commonly employ this name. In addition to Mormon Church, I will use LDS Church or simply the church when describing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I will refer to people belonging to this church as Mormons, LDS, Saints, or members. “Style Guide—The Name of the Church,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/style-guide> (accessed July 26, 2013). Bruce D. Blumell, “The LDS Response to the Teton Dam Disaster in Idaho,” *Sunstone Magazine*, (March-April, 1980): 40, [https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/wp-content-uploads/sbi/articles/020-35-42.pdf](https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/020-35-42.pdf) (accessed August 29, 2011): 35.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 251.

For Arrington and Bitton, this attempt to maintain the distinctive fundamentals of Mormonism while changing elements of the church to adapt to mainstream American culture actually led to only superficial modifications. Original nineteenth century church principles that made Mormonism unique among other American sects undermined any apparent changes in later years. *The Mormon Experience* argues that this failure to fully integrate into American culture manifests itself in the church's heavy influence on members' lives, continuing commitment to economic cooperation with the rise of their welfare system, and the homogenous political makeup of the membership.<sup>6</sup> Interactions between the Mormon Church and various government agencies allow for a modern case study that supports Arrington and Bitton's argument. The Teton Dam recovery effort orchestrated by the LDS Church demonstrated an event in Mormon history where the church believed it had once again worked to accommodate American culture and government, thereby further improving relations between itself and the government. Yet, deeper analysis reveals that the Mormon experiences of the Teton Dam recovery period confirm Arrington and Bitton's assertions involving Mormon adaptations to American culture as largely superficial.

The recovery effort following the collapse of the Teton Dam provided an opportunity for eastern Idaho leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to change their historic perception of a mutually antagonistic relationship with the federal government. Based on their performance following the disaster, the church believed it had successfully worked to improve its interactions with government agencies and ended hostile attitudes on both sides. Teton provided an

---

<sup>6</sup> Arrington, *The Mormon Experience*, 252-253.

opportunity for the LDS church, using its welfare system and priesthood (lay male leadership) organizational structure to seamlessly work with the government agencies sent to help flood victims in eastern Idaho. Church leaders used the positive interactions between its members and the federal and local leaders to celebrate an effective assimilation of its principles into mainstream culture, even using distinctive aspects of Mormon culture and practice to enhance the government's recovery efforts. While the Teton Dam failure did encourage a previously unprecedented level of cooperation between the federal or local government and the LDS Church, this recovery effort also demonstrated an inability or unwillingness of the church to actually abandon its unique beliefs and procedures.

An example of the church insisting on its religious tenets dictating its behavior during the recovery period is manifested when LDS flood victims relied first on the church to meet most of their needs during the summer of 1976. The church welfare system arrived immediately following the floodwaters to provide for the most basic material needs of the victims. LDS welfare services stayed several months to supply food and other goods to the eastern Idahoans affected by the disaster. In addition to the provisions presented by the church's welfare program, the Red Cross set up a base of operations in Idaho Falls to assist victims. However, the majority of the Mormon residents believed they could not utilize the Red Cross because it violated the church's stance on the need to maintain self-sufficiency and avoid "handouts." Mormon victims also underused food stamps from the government because they viewed them as a kind of "dole" system about which their doctrinal beliefs had warned them. The First Presidency (the highest governing body of the church) eventually released a statement clarifying

their position on government assistance, subsidies, and loans in the case of the Teton Dam disaster, allowing members to avail themselves of these services. Yet, even after this advice from the leadership of the church, many members found it difficult to utilize any aid not offered by the church, and reverted to a trend of wariness toward outside institutions, especially the federal government.

Even when using government agencies, local church leaders mediated interactions between eastern Idaho Mormons and federal relief agencies, maintaining the top down leadership style characteristic of the Mormon Church from its inception. The local priesthood holders also organized a widespread cleanup effort to remove the mud and debris from homes in the flood zone with volunteers from Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah, preferring not to wait for any type of direction on this matter from government agencies that arrived later. Local priesthood leaders also monitored all of the work done in Rexburg and Sugar City by church volunteers or government agencies, which they planned and discussed in priesthood correlation meetings occurring every morning for approximately the first six weeks following the disaster. Agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Small Business Administration (SBA) agreed that using the Mormon priesthood system streamlined their process and worked amicably with the local church leaders. While this arrangement between the priesthood and outside agencies made the recovery period one of the most efficient following any disaster in the United States, it demonstrated an unwillingness by the church to fully submit to any government agency and allow it to function without oversight by the priesthood.

The dam collapse allowed for a potential point of change in a larger narrative of

Mormon history noted by mutual antagonism between the church and government. This change is a matter of perception by members of the church and their leadership during the late 1970s. The nature of the sources available regarding exchanges between church leaders and representatives of government agencies does not yield quantifiable data that confirms actual changes to church policy and behavior. The oral histories also do not yield a balanced amount of information regarding reactions by non-Mormons and government employees toward Mormon control of the recovery effort during this period. These sources focus largely on Mormon responses to the collapse of the dam, the way the church and government addressed the recovery effort, and how they believed this changed the church and its relationship with the government.

The analysis in this thesis relies heavily on these oral history interviews conducted by Ricks College (now Brigham Young University-Idaho), Utah State University, and LDS Church historians in the years immediately following the collapse of the dam. Ricks College combined some of these oral histories into a collection entitled *That Day in June: Reflections on the Teton Dam Disaster*, but most of the interviews reside as transcripts in BYU-Idaho's Teton Dam Collection, the largest repository of documents pertaining to the dam. Basing the argument of this thesis on largely Mormon oral histories may seem problematic as many of the interviewees describe their subjective reactions and religious beliefs as factual. However, my argument evaluates the perceptions of Mormon members and leaders and their analysis of the recovery effort. For this stated purpose, the largely unused Teton Dam oral history collection provides an excellent resource to capture the response of the LDS Church membership to the events following the disaster and adds needed analysis to the existing Teton Dam scholarship.

Another potential problem arises from interviews performed by Bruce Blumell, LDS Church Historian during the Teton Dam recovery period. Facing a Mormon interviewer, some interviewees may have sensed that they could not be entirely objective or critical of the LDS Church or its members. Government or Red Cross representatives represented a small non-Mormon minority in eastern Idaho, and may have thought it necessary to respond positively to Blumell about their interactions with the LDS Church.

Historians Marc Reisner and Donald Worster have produced compelling accounts of the collapse of the Teton Dam in the context of examining water management in the western U.S. Reisner and Worster both view the Teton Dam disaster as an unqualified failure of the Bureau of Reclamation caused by the hubris of this institution and the clamoring greed for water by westerners. My thesis does not delve into a larger examination of western water management or the Bureau of Reclamation and its role in Teton. *Cadillac Desert* and *Rivers of Empire*, by Reisner and Worster respectively, are the definitive works on these issues. In these narratives addressing dams and irrigation in the West, both Worster and Reisner discussed the relationship between Mormons and dam building and cast it in a negative light. My work here builds on their assessment by tying their analysis of Mormons to the Teton Dam specifically and continuing beyond the dam disaster.

Mormon historians have also analyzed the Teton Dam disaster as a part of a larger picture of Mormonism in America. Leonard Arrington, Davis Bitton, and F. Ross Peterson used Teton to celebrate the recovery effort executed by the LDS Church as a positive chapter in Mormon history. The analysis in this thesis agrees that Teton was both a catastrophic event for eastern Idaho and the Bureau while providing the LDS



Church with an opportunity to prove the value and effectiveness of its welfare system and priesthood leadership. However, further evaluation of the sources used reveals a more nuanced judgment of the Mormon-led recovery effort. The success of the church resulted not only from its laudatory efforts but also from an unprecedented level of accommodation of the church's practices and beliefs by government and other agencies during the recovery period. The LDS Church concluded it achieved its stated goal of improving its public image with its welfare system and doctrine of self-reliance following the collapse of the dam. Nevertheless, without the cooperation and willingness of the other organizations involved, the church could have returned to the historically antagonistic relationship that marked its earlier interactions with the federal government.

While this thesis looks directly at Mormonism and how its distinctive beliefs and leadership hierarchy influenced the recovery effort, it is not a direct analysis of Mormon doctrine. I have utilized the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center's article "Religious Studies," and the article "A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies" by Faye Halpern, et al. to make a distinction between a doctrinal evaluation of Mormonism, which this thesis is not, and a historical look at a religious group, which is the approach I employed. These sources also provide excellent information and instruction for historians looking at religious sources and guidance for maintaining objectivity in the overall analysis of an event that involves a religious group.<sup>7</sup> Many of the personal accounts I rely on speak in religious tones and terminology unique to the LDS Church

---

<sup>7</sup> Faye Halpern, et al. *A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies*. The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2007. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center. "Religious Studies," <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/religious-studies/>, (accessed March 6, 2013).

and I will endeavor to make it clear to the reader that this is the interviewee's perspective.

Many of the individuals whose experiences I analyze were both local leaders in the Mormon Church and in local government or business and provide the exclusive vantage point of expressing a valid assessment of Mormon interactions with representatives of government agencies. All of the Madison County Commissioners and Civil Defense leaders belonged to the LDS Church and held leadership positions within the church. They worked in both their civil and religious positions without making a distinction between the two roles.<sup>8</sup> These men believed that they participated in a turning point in Mormon history where Mormons and the U.S. government both worked toward and achieved a more amicable relationship and ended more than a century's worth of reciprocated antagonism.

The first chapter of this thesis establishes the nineteenth and early twentieth century struggles between the LDS Church and local and federal government. The second chapter addresses the longstanding relationship between Mormons and the Teton Dam, where the supposed need for the dam, the construction phase, and its eventual collapse are treated. The third chapter examines the historiography surrounding this disaster from its place in the narrative of western water management to its role in Mormon history. The LDS Welfare system's contributions following the disaster and its intense desire to protect the members and church from too much reliance on outside agencies comprise the analysis in chapter four. The fifth chapter looks into the use of the local priesthood leadership to coordinate the recovery efforts of the church and other

---

<sup>8</sup> T. Bardell Klingler, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 154, MSS1 2, BYUISC. Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 1, MSS1 2, BYUISC. Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 37, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

agencies outside the church. The massive volunteer effort that chapter six explores depicts the belief by many priesthood leaders in eastern Idaho that church members had a wide variety of assets to draw upon in a disaster scenario and could, in future situations, maintain an even greater level of independence from other organizations.

The money, provisions, and time donated by the LDS Church to the recovery efforts in eastern Idaho in 1976 undoubtedly contributed to a more efficient rebuilding period that allowed the victims to restore their damaged lives more quickly. Members of the church claimed to have the faith they placed in the policies and doctrines espoused by their religion confirmed. Local and general leadership concluded that they carried out their responsibilities in such a way as to secure a more positive image from those outside the church. This environmental crisis provided an opportunity for the LDS Church in 1976 to showcase its beliefs and practices, which the federal government and mainstream American culture had historically found objectionable. It also allowed the church to create a narrative based on its work following the collapse of the dam, which showed the value of its priesthood leadership, welfare system, communal spirit, and the doctrine of self-sufficiency.

## CHAPTER 2: A “CONFLICT BETWEEN SOVEREIGNS”

The distinctive traits of Mormonism discussed in this thesis emerged in the 1840s. Fleeing persecution and facing a daunting crossing in unknown territory reinforced the priority of the LDS community over the individual and the submission to the authority of strong leaders. Donald Worster, in *Rivers of Empire*, argued that this emphasis on group welfare, which went directly against the popular Jeffersonian notion that glorified self-sufficient farmers, would not have developed in some of the Mormons’ earlier homes in New York, Ohio, Illinois, or Missouri. Believing that members would quickly leave when tempted with easy opportunities to make their own way, Worster asserted that the trek to Utah solidified the Mormon ideal of community and allowed its members to submit to the church hierarchy in the pursuit of collective success. “In Utah, the Church had an excellent environment for creating an agrarian society ruled by a central power. There the hierarchy could insist [...] on cohesion, dominance, and discipline.”<sup>9</sup> This “cohesion, dominance, and discipline” followed the Saints north to eastern Idaho and forward one hundred and thirty years later to the time of the Teton Dam disaster.<sup>10</sup>

Not long after the murder of Joseph Smith, founder and first president of the LDS Church, at Carthage Jail in the summer of 1844, Brigham Young assumed the leadership

---

<sup>9</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> Within the LDS Church, the term “Saints” indicates members. Those in the early church employed the term heavily when describing the membership. James K. Lyon, “Saints,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1149-1150.

of the main congregation of the church.<sup>11</sup> Early in Young's tenure as president of the church, he realized the necessity of moving his followers out of Nauvoo, Illinois where they continued to endure persecution by outsiders. Young researched land that belonged to Mexico until the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under escalating pressure from local mobs and government officials, Young and his followers began to leave their homes in search of a peaceful existence in the West. The exodus involved several thousand miles of arduous travel to a destination largely unknown.<sup>12</sup> Upon entering the Salt Lake Valley in present-day Utah in 1847, Young believed he had found their sanctuary and members quickly began to make it their home.

The isolation and their work in irrigation (discussed in the following chapter) allowed Mormons in Utah to flourish. Their success encouraged the church to expand its borders by establishing new settlements radiating out from the Salt Lake Valley. Thomas E. Ricks, a convert to the LDS Church in the latter half of the nineteenth century, worked on the Northern Pacific Railroad. These experiences with the railroad allowed him to travel through the Upper Snake River Valley, where he eventually led a Mormon colonization effort in 1882.<sup>13</sup> Ricks contacted church president, John Taylor, to inform him of his intentions to form a colony in the Idaho territory, which he called Rexburg. President Taylor advised him to avoid antagonizing non-Mormons and Native Americans already settled in the area. He encouraged Ricks to follow the successful pattern of Mormon colonization employed by the church for thirty years by forming a close-knit

---

<sup>11</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 80-81.

<sup>12</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 95-96.

<sup>13</sup> David L. Crowder, *Rexburg, Idaho: The First One Hundred Years, 1883-1983*, (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1983), 11.

community. This strategy allowed for two obvious benefits, the first because close proximity would make gathering together for religious meetings easier and the second allowed for a collective approach to finances, irrigation, security, and other secular matters.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after its formation, Rexburg experienced a rash of anti-Mormon sentiment from Idaho courts, government, and residents. An anti-Mormon jury subjected Thomas Ricks to a lengthy trial and sentenced him to a term in the territorial prison for polygamy in 1889. President Wilford Woodruff issued a Manifesto prohibiting future polygamous unions in 1890, causing the Idaho court to lose interest in Ricks' case and set the conviction aside.<sup>15</sup> Law enforcement found it difficult to apprehend and prosecute polygamists and soon lost interest in this method of provoking Mormons. Anti-Mormon sentiment in Idaho soon found more effective methods of antagonizing LDS communities.

Idaho Anti-Mormons struck a blow at Rexburg Mormons when they renamed the town "Kaintuck" from 1889-1893. Harvey Walker "Kentucky" Smith assisted with anti-Mormon judicial and political moves in the territory and, unsurprisingly, townspeople in Rexburg disliked him and referred to him derisively as "Kaintuck." Frederick Thomas Dubois had a longstanding feud with Idaho Mormons who had refused to vote for him. Dubois responded as a U. S. Marshall by hunting down polygamists for arrest. His ultimate revenge came when, as a delegate for the Idaho territorial delegation to

---

<sup>14</sup> Crowder, 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Official Declaration 1, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 291-293.

Washington, D.C., he used this opportunity to rename the Rexburg post office after “Kaintuck” Smith. Rexburg officially became Kaintuck for four years. Some outside of Idaho agreed, that “under territorial government the Mormons have been dealt with with a pretty high hand.”<sup>16</sup>

One of the final official battles between Mormons and their non-Mormon neighbors came when Thomas Ricks secured the Fremont County seat (which encompassed present-day Fremont, Jefferson, Madison, and part of Butte counties). Ricks and the rest of Rexburg assumed that Rexburg would be the county seat as it was the second largest city in Idaho in 1893. However, Governor William McConnell designated St. Anthony the temporary county seat until an 1894 election. St. Anthony, Market Lake, and Rexburg all vied for the county seat at the ballot box. Each city campaigned heavily to secure the seat of Fremont County, with Rexburg heavily favored to win. Despite its superior number of voters, Rexburg lost to St. Anthony. Many in Rexburg attributed Rexburg’s defeat to anti-Mormon sentiment. However, Rexburg historian David Crowder argued, “that for St. Anthony to win meant that a substantial number of Mormon voters living outside Rexburg had voted for St. Anthony.” Religious leaders in Rexburg encouraged the townspeople to let the loss go, end their complaining about anti-Mormon movements, and focus on the future prosperity of Rexburg.<sup>17</sup> While Rexburg did move past the anti-Mormon attitudes, it maintained a wariness toward state and federal government interference long after the nineteenth century evidenced by their behavior in the summer of 1976.

---

<sup>16</sup> G. Frederick Wright, “The Mormon Question in Idaho,” *The Nation*, no. 1317 (September 25, 1890): 243.

<sup>17</sup> Crowder, 107.

The anti-Mormon movement in eastern Idaho mirrored a statewide trend that utilized judicial and legislative means to rile Mormons in Idaho in the late nineteenth century. E. Leo Lyman argued that “controversy surrounding Mormonism may have been an even larger factor in Idaho politics than it was in Utah during their later territorial periods.”<sup>18</sup> The opposition in Idaho more easily overpowered Mormons than anti-Mormon movements in Utah for several reasons. Communities in eastern Idaho tended to be mixtures of Mormon and non-Mormon populations in equal proportions, and the local governments were not theocratic like their Utah counterparts.<sup>19</sup> The anti-Mormon movement in Idaho had several objections to the Mormon presence in their state (the largest Mormon population outside Utah). Their initial objections came from a continuing stream of Mormons migrating northward from Utah, the tendency to form exclusive social and religious communities, their economic cooperatives from which they financially benefited, and the belief that they voted as a bloc for Democratic candidates and platforms. Radical anti-Mormon Republicans in Idaho used the Mormon practice of polygamy as justification to disenfranchise Mormon voters (including many Mormons who did not participate in polygamy and those who had recently left the church) in the state, thereby lessening support for Idaho Democrats.<sup>20</sup>

Those involved in the Idaho anti-Mormon movement believed that polygamy led church leaders into other illegal activities including evasion of law enforcement officers

---

<sup>18</sup> E. Leo Lyman, “A Mormon Transition in Idaho Politics,” *Idaho Yesterdays* 20, no. 4, (Winter 1977): 2.

<sup>19</sup> Merle W. Wells, *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1892*, Studies in Mormon History (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), xv.

<sup>20</sup> Merle W. Wells, “The Idaho Anti-Mormon Test Oath, 1884-1892,” *The Pacific Historical Review* XXIV, no 3 (August, 1995), 235-236.



or potentially plotting to overthrow the government. They reasoned that members of the church did not vote freely because a “subversive, treasonous priesthood” dictated to them, and used this excuse to attempt to disenfranchise Mormons within the state.<sup>21</sup> Because they could not infringe on a U.S. citizen’s right to practice his religion, they formed a test oath act that did not actually mention the LDS Church by name, yet left little doubt about the identity of their intended target:

any order, organization, or association which teaches, advises, counsels, or encourages its members or devotees, or any other persons, to commit the crime of bigamy or polygamy, or any other crime defined by law, either as a rite or a ceremony of such order...” was [not] to be permitted to vote, hold office, or serve on a jury.<sup>22</sup>

The Test-Oath Act effectively prevented most participation by Mormons in government during the years it was in effect (1884-1892); however, it did not harm Mormon communities as much as its authors believed it would. Mormon communities had already learned to survive independently of most government institutions. They used their own church courts to enforce their teachings and formed their own schools to avoid battles over public school administration.<sup>23</sup>

Idaho entered the Union in 1890 with a warning to Mormons that an anti-Mormon territory had now become an anti-Mormon state. Worried that Mormons would be able to vote again, radical Republicans worked to add a retroactive clause to the Test Oath Act stating that anyone who had belonged to a church that practiced polygamy on January 1,

---

<sup>21</sup> Merle W. Wells, “The Idaho Anti-Mormon Test Oath, 1884-1892,” 236.

<sup>22</sup> Oath of Intention—Registration: An Act to amend section 501, Revised Statutes of Idaho. January 29, 1889 General Laws of the Territory of Idaho, Passed at the Fifteenth Session, (James A. Pinney, Territorial Printer, 1889), 14-15. <http://books.google.com/> (accessed July 26, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Merle W. Wells, “The Idaho Anti-Mormon Test Oath, 1884-1892,” 241-242.

1888, would be disenfranchised. These Republicans drafted a state constitution that effectively made Idaho an anti-Mormon state if approved by Congress. Under fire, the Mormon Church responded to these laws by making some concessions. President Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto ending the practice of polygamy quelled some fears about the future of polygamy in the LDS Church.<sup>24</sup> He also answered critics wary of the church's theocratic hierarchy by assuring them that the LDS Church was firmly committed to a separation of church and state. Despite these concessions, Congress overwhelmingly approved Idaho's anti-Mormon constitution.<sup>25</sup> Eventually the anti-Mormon movement weakened due to internal differences and the Mormons' willingness to adapt their religious practices to meet Idaho law. Idaho legislators repealed the Test-Oath Act in 1894.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, some anti-Mormon elements remained in the Idaho Constitution until 1982, demonstrating the enduring anti-Mormon sentiment in the state as late as the latter half of the twentieth-century.<sup>27</sup>

Anti-Mormon movements extended beyond state politics onto the national scene with the passage of the Edmunds and the Edmunds-Tucker Acts. *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America*, by Sarah

---

<sup>24</sup> Celestial and patriarchal marriages, solemnized in LDS temples, could still be performed, but they only had effect after earth-life. Woodruff's Manifesto merely changed the earthly practice of polygamy. Idaho anti-Mormons still objected to any polygamous unions whether in mortality or after death, and tried to combat this practice during 1904 and 1908 political campaigns. In 1908, Idaho's Supreme Court allowed voters to support celestial marriage in heaven as long as they did not practice it on earth. Merle W. Wells, "Law in the Service of Politics: Anti-Mormonism in Idaho Territory," *Idaho Yesterdays* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 43.

<sup>25</sup> Merle W. Wells, *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1892*, 140-146.

<sup>26</sup> Merle W. Wells, "The Idaho Anti-Mormon Test Oath, 1884-1892," 251.

<sup>27</sup> Carlos A. Schwantes, *In Mountain Shadows: A History of Idaho*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 127.

Barringer Gordon, provides a comprehensive and fascinating look at this constitutional law crisis. Gordon labeled the fight between the Mormon Church and the federal government a “conflict between sovereigns.”<sup>28</sup> She argued that Mormons unjustly received no support or protection from the Missouri or Illinois state governments. For Gordon, the federal government had the responsibility of addressing the expulsion of Mormons from Illinois and Missouri. When the church settled in Utah, it was not yet a territory, making the issue of sovereignty ambiguous (at least in Mormon minds) in terms of control over local government. The federal government chose polygamy for the battleground in the legal war against Mormon theocratic sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> In 1882, the Edmunds Act became federal law, disenfranchising and barring any men practicing polygamy from juries or public office. While it was decidedly a victory for anti-polygamists and the federal government’s power, it still did not strike a major blow at the Mormon theocracy.<sup>30</sup>

The passage of the Edmunds-Tucker Act in 1887 hit the Mormon theocracy and practice of polygamy with more force than the 1882 effort. The later act added more restrictions on marriage and the rights of those practicing polygamy, disenfranchised Utah women, and ended the church’s Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company.<sup>31</sup> The U.S.

---

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon, 108-113.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. 1882. Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882. 47<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. Reprinted in *Select Statutes and Other Documents Illustrative of the History of the United States, 1861-1898*, William MacDonald, ed. 1922, 319-323. <http://books.google.com> (accessed July 24, 2013). Gordon, 151-153.

Supreme Court upheld an attempt to use the Edmunds-Tucker Act to dismantle the corporation of the Mormon Church in 1890, allowing for the confiscation of all of its property except for buildings utilized for worship.<sup>32</sup> These extreme acts by Congress forced Mormons to make drastic changes to their religion in order to survive, such as abandoning polygamy. Gordon concluded her book by questioning who won the battle for sovereignty. She argued that the federal government soundly defeated the church in a constitutional battle. Nevertheless, Gordon indicated that the church quickly recovered financially and lost very few of its members during this period, leading her to conclude that the government's victory was "symbolic" at best.<sup>33</sup>

After the legal wrangling of the late nineteenth century ended, the church refocused its energies repairing the economic damage done to the church, assisting its members financially, and attempting to either assimilate into mainstream culture or avoid it. Leonard Arrington argued in *The Mormon Experience* that after fifty years of conflict between the church and federal government, "Mormon institutions were undergoing profound changes, but the basic religious programs were as vigorous as they were during the administration of Brigham Young."<sup>34</sup> While the Mormon hierarchy moved away from having direct control and involvement in communities through managing irrigation, operating their own schools, and having their own political parties, they maintained what

---

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. 1887. Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. 49<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. Reprinted in *Select Statutes and Other Documents Illustrative of the History of the United States, 1861-1898*, William MacDonal, ed. 1922, 380-389. <http://books.google.com> (accessed July 24, 2013). Gordon, 167-172.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1892*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, 251-252.

<sup>34</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 108.

Worster called, a “shadow theocracy.”<sup>35</sup> Although the outside trappings of the Mormon theocracy fell away, as Arrington stated, the doctrines and religious programs endured. The Mormon hierarchy continued to influence its members heavily but in a less direct manner.

Matthew C. Godfrey, in his work *Religion, Politics, and Sugar: The Mormon Church, the Federal Government, and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1907-1921*, provided an excellent look at the church’s transition from direct involvement in business into a convoluted “shadow theocracy” with a less-defined influence on Mormon-run enterprises. When the Utah Sugar Company fell on hard times in the 1890s and could not repay its investors, President Wilford Woodruff circulated a letter to bishops and stake presidents in Utah encouraging them to support the company. Woodruff believed that the Utah Sugar Company would prove an economic boon to church members by presenting affordable sugar to consumers and more jobs for the members of the church in Utah. Woodruff supported his sentiments by investing \$180,000 into the enterprise and calling Heber J. Grant on a special church assignment to raise more funds to prop up the company. In 1907, the Idaho Sugar Company and the Western Idaho Sugar Company joined the Utah Sugar Company, forming the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company with Prophet Joseph F. Smith as its president.<sup>36</sup>

In 1911, the House of Representatives evaluated the American Sugar Refining Company to see if it violated the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. As part of this

---

<sup>35</sup> Worster, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew C. Godfrey, *Religion, Politics, and Sugar: The Mormon Church, the Federal Government, and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1907-1921*, (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), 33-35, 46-48.

investigation, they evaluated American Sugar's relationship with Utah-Idaho Sugar.<sup>37</sup> Senator Hardwick of Georgia and his committee accused and established that the Sugar Trust (American Sugar and Utah-Idaho Sugar) had violated antitrust legislation, but never actually penalized them. The real damage resulted from accusations regarding too much involvement by the Mormon hierarchy in the company, their willingness to manipulate their followers to turn a profit, and their followers' inability or unwillingness to challenge their church leaders.<sup>38</sup> Although the church had tried to move out of economic concerns in Mormon-dominated regions, the transition proved rocky at best, bringing more negative publicity and power struggles with the U.S. government in the early twentieth century.

After constantly facing-off against the government for over half a century, "the Mormons increasingly behaved as a normal religious denomination, rather than as a separate nationality or a millennial proto-state," argued historian Nathan B. Oman. Oman asserted political restraint by the church marked the remainder of the twentieth century. It carefully avoided political issues and only occasionally involved itself with moral issues that pertained to LDS doctrines such as Prohibition, gambling, and the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>39</sup> By the 1960s and 1970s their once radical adherence to traditional moral values became what historians Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen termed strongly conservative; "Mormondom had become in its ideals a microcosm of what America was,

---

<sup>37</sup> Godfrey, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Godfrey, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Nathan B. Oman, "Mormonism and Secular Government," in *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 331, 336.

not what it was becoming.”<sup>40</sup> Their accommodations to conservative American political and social norms were mostly on the surface, however, while their unique doctrines remained the same.<sup>41</sup> The church hierarchy focused its efforts on generating positive publicity highlighting facets of their religion and community long overshadowed by the negativity of the previous one hundred years.

Eastern Idaho communities dominated by Mormons participated in the active separation of their church from government and cooperative business ventures. Their reliance on their religion for political and cultural guidance remained intact from the nineteenth century as members moved into the latter-half of the twentieth century. After struggling with government on a local and national level, most Mormons in eastern Idaho maintained a guarded attitude toward these institutions. The Bureau of Reclamation and its water policies and projects in the West proved a glaring exception to their negative feelings toward government. Irrigation and dam building had played a large role in the success of western Mormon settlements. When the Bureau continued its work of “making the desert blossom” in the twentieth century, the LDS Church overwhelmingly supported its efforts.

---

<sup>40</sup> Marvin S. Hill and James R. Allen ed., *Mormonism in American Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 145.

<sup>41</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 252.

CHAPTER 3: INSATIABLE WATER NEEDS, FAULTY GROUTING CURTAINS,  
AND THE SHORT LIFE OF THE TETON DAM

The relationship between Mormons in eastern Idaho and the Teton Dam began long before its collapse. Manipulating rivers to irrigate the arid West had a history stretching back to the arrival of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints under the direction of their prophet Brigham Young in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Marc Reisner, in his work *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, claimed that within hours of reaching the Salt Lake Valley the early Saints began constructing irrigation canals. Reisner asserted, “Without realizing it, they were laying the foundation of the most ambitious desert civilization the world has seen.” Critical of both the LDS Church and western water management programs, Reisner went on to declare that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, formed in 1902, was “based on Mormon experience, guided by Mormon laws, [and] run largely by Mormons.”<sup>43</sup>

Michael C. Robinson, in his work *Water for the West: The Bureau of Reclamation 1902-1977*, lauded the early Mormon system of irrigation. Robinson suggested that Mormon success with irrigation in Utah rested heavily on their luck in settling near several small streams and in their highly developed sense of community. This sense of community placed the collective goal above the desires of individuals, “To Latter-day Saints, reclaiming the desert was part of ‘building up the Kingdom of God on Earth.’”

---

<sup>42</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 110-111.

<sup>43</sup> Reisner, 2.



Thus, community interest was placed above individual gain.” Sympathetic to the Bureau of Reclamation’s mission of providing water for the arid states of the West, Robinson believed that Mormon pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley provided the groundwork for larger water projects that it would later develop beginning in 1902.<sup>44</sup>

From 1904, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers evaluated various sites on or near the Teton River for the possible placement of a dam to store water, produce power, and prevent flooding. One of the first proposed sites they assessed in 1932 lay fifteen miles from the future dam site in the Teton River Canyon. They rejected this site because it would not maximize irrigation and flood control in the area due to its inability to completely manage the river drain off. The Bureau of Reclamation returned to the project in 1946 looking at two sites on Canyon Creek, but found these also could not grant enough control of the Teton River. The Bureau proposed a smaller dam at the mouth of the canyon in 1956. The Bureau claimed this particular site could only control flooding in the area but would fail to provide any irrigational benefits.<sup>45</sup> Without the possibility of improving irrigation, many residents of the Upper Snake River Valley concurred this project lacked merit.

Agriculture dominated Mormon communities in eastern Idaho, and with this pursuit followed a need for more irrigation developments in the northern reaches of Mormon country. The nature of the soil in the Snake River Plain perfectly suited Idaho’s signature agricultural product, the potato, with its loose and somewhat sandy soil.

---

<sup>44</sup> Michael C. Robinson, *Water for the West: The Bureau of Reclamation 1902-1977*, (Chicago: Public Works Historical Society, 1979), 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Louis J. Clements, *Teton Flood: June 5, 1976 Revisited*, (Rexburg, ID: Eastern Idaho Publishing, 1991), 4.

Unfortunately, this type of soil drains quickly, requiring copious amounts of water to make it profitable for farming. The Snake River brings in a considerable amount of water from the spring runoff on the Yellowstone Plateau and Grand Teton Mountains, but the water continues down the Snake before farmers can fully utilize it. A drought in 1961 and a flood in 1962 hit eastern Idaho hard, causing several hundred thousand dollars in damage and led to another serious look at constructing a dam in the Teton River Canyon.<sup>46</sup>

A committee formed between the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation in 1956 to evaluate the Upper Snake River Basin, which included some initial investigatory work on the Teton Project. In 1961 and 1962, the Bureau took several core samples at the site where they eventually constructed the Teton Dam. The Bureau also evaluated the geological feasibility of the original dam site and a site further up the canyon. Deeming both locations geologically sound for a possible dam, the Bureau favored the original site because it promised greater irrigation and flood control benefits. Several reports compiled by geologists remarked that seepage from the reservoir in large quantities could occur. In March 1962, the Corps of Engineers recommended the proposed Teton Project with a dam at the original site.<sup>47</sup>

Reisner argued that while the region debated the possibility of a dam over more than half a century, it received authorization and began construction in a “great hurry.”<sup>48</sup> He attributed this sudden desire to move forward with the project to one local man, “a

---

<sup>46</sup> Reisner, 384-385.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior. Teton Dam Failure Review Group. April 1977. *Failure of the Teton Dam: A Report of Findings*, by William F. Eikenberry et al. U.S. Government Printing Office, Denver, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Reisner, 385.

crotchety Mormon farmer” named Willis Walker. Walker served as the president of the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District and united farmers in this district behind the cause of a potential Teton Dam.<sup>49</sup> Reisner acerbically pointed out the irony of a Mormon farmer calling for federal spending on a dam and irrigation project. He quoted critic of the dam Russell Brown, a senior research engineer for Allied Chemical Corporation, “Mormons get burned up when they read about someone buying a bottle of mouthwash with food stamps, but they love big water projects. They only object to nickel-and-dime welfare. They love it in great big gobs.”<sup>50</sup>

On September 7, 1964, a public law authorized the construction of the Teton Dam at its present site.<sup>51</sup> The Office of Design and Construction of the Bureau designed the dam out of its Denver Federal Center.<sup>52</sup> After Harold Arthur, the Director of Design and Construction, completed the design in early 1971, the Bureau called for construction bids that included all facets of the dam project except the mechanical and electrical aspects. On December 13, 1971, the Bureau awarded Morrison-Knudsen-Kiewit the contract for 39.5 million dollars and told them to proceed the following day.<sup>53</sup> Excavators began working on the dam site in February 1972. Workers broke ground before the opposition had time to organize a public forum addressing the potential merits or problems posed by

---

<sup>49</sup> Reisner, 385.

<sup>50</sup> Clements, 6. Reisner, 386.

<sup>51</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, *Report to U.S. Department of the Interior and State of Idaho on Failure of Teton Dam*, Wallace L. Chadwick, and Arthur Casagrande. (Idaho Falls, Idaho: The Panel, 1976), v.

<sup>52</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 8-1.

<sup>53</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 9-1.

the Teton Dam.<sup>54</sup>

On June 2, 1972, a conference regarding the construction of the Teton Dam convened in Idaho Falls, with the opposition to the dam heavily represented. Many concerned about the environment, the safety of the site, and the necessity of the project voiced their disagreement with the position that the dam project had value. Robert Sherwood and Paul Jeppson from the Idaho Fish and Game Department deplored the effects of the dam on the fish population, which would suffer due to higher river water temperatures. The deer in the region would also lose thousands of grazing acres along the river. Many skeptical of the dam questioned the actual economic value and benefit.<sup>55</sup> A report by the Bureau admitted that the dam would only provide a couple more inches of water to farmers who already received a fair amount of water without the dam. The Teton Dam promised local farmers 132 inches of water per year; an extreme figure by western standards and on par with the annual rainfall of tropical forests.<sup>56</sup>

The most alarming arguments against the dam focused on potential safety issues, when combined with the negative environmental impact and perceived lack of economic benefit made the dam look like more trouble than it was worth. Russell Brown pointed out a major issue at the Idaho Falls meeting: the proposed dam site resided in the center of a major risk earthquake zone.<sup>57</sup> Reisner recalled an internal 1972 Bureau memorandum penned by geologist Dave Schleicher where he recounted several serious flaws with the dam site of which he believed the Bureau remained ignorant. He pointed

---

<sup>54</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 9-10.

<sup>55</sup> Clements, 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Reisner, 387.

<sup>57</sup> Clements, 6. U.S. Department of the Interior, 13.

out that within thirty miles of the dam five earthquakes had occurred in the last five years. Schleicher expressed concern that he could not find any evidence in project documents where the Bureau acknowledged those risks. His memorandum concluded:

A final point is that flooding in response to seismic or other failure of the dam—probably most likely at the time of highest water—would make the flood of February 1962 look like small potatoes. *Since such a flood could be anticipated, we might consider a series of strategically-placed motion-picture cameras to document the process...*

Someone within the Bureau edited the memorandum to remove Schleicher's alarmist tone before passing it on to Robbie Robison, the Bureau's on-site Chief engineer.<sup>58</sup>

Aside from seismic risks, geological studies revealed that the canyon walls and floor presented an exceptional challenge for dam engineers. Drilling tests conducted over a period of several years before the construction of the dam demonstrated that fissures riddled the walls of the canyon, increasing the likelihood of leaks from the reservoir. The Bureau performed grouting tests that involved pumping cement into crevices on the south abutment of the dam to ascertain whether the Bureau's plan would effectively address the highly porous canyon walls. The Bureau did not perform grouting tests on the north abutment of the dam where they would later discover enormous fissures.<sup>59</sup>

The Bureau's handling of the porous nature of the canyon wall calls into question its full understanding of the terrain they chose and its willingness to admit that it had never faced a site like this on any of its previous projects. The Bureau's engineers had a near perfect dam building record from the beginning of the twentieth century (the Fontenelle Dam in Wyoming threatened to collapse in 1965, but the Bureau salvaged the

---

<sup>58</sup> Reisner, 391. (Reisner's emphasis).

<sup>59</sup> Reisner, 396-397.

situation with quick repairs, preventing a disaster). Robbie Robison, in a memo to his superiors, called attention to “unusually large” fissures found in the right abutment of the dam, one eleven feet wide and another one hundred feet long. The Bureau initially missed these “unusually large” crevices in its preliminary assessment and actually decided against grouting them in the interest of maintaining its construction schedule.<sup>60</sup> Clifford Okeson, a Bureau geologist who examined the dam site, recalled that the Teton Dam required more grouting than any previous Bureau dam. He also remembered that the Bureau decided against filling an eleven-foot fissure discovered in November 1974 because it would have delayed the project.<sup>61</sup>

The earth filled embankment of the Teton Dam reached 305 feet (5,322 feet above sea level) with the crest at 3,100 feet across when dam construction ended in November 1975. The Bureau began to fill the reservoir a month earlier and it achieved a depth of 185 feet in May of 1976.<sup>62</sup> The snowpack during the winter of 1975-76 reached levels well above one hundred percent and in some areas over two hundred percent of the average snow water equivalents. The Bureau had cautiously implemented rules about the rate of filling a reservoir, especially for a newly constructed dam, that resided over five thousand feet above sea level.<sup>63</sup> To detect any type of problems with any portion of the dam or reservoir, the Bureau kept the rate of fill at or below one foot a day for the

---

<sup>60</sup> Reisner, 381, 397.

<sup>61</sup> “Potential dam trouble seen more than year ago,” *The Rexburg Standard*, July 21, 1976, box 1, folder 5, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>62</sup> Clements, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 10-10.

reservoir with daily inspections at and below the dam for leaks.<sup>64</sup>

Robbie Robison wrote in March 1976 to Harold Arthur in Denver requesting permission to accelerate the rate to two feet per day in an effort to speed up the filling of the reservoir and truly test the effectiveness of the Bureau's elaborate grout curtain.

Arthur consented to the two feet per day limit for May of that year.<sup>65</sup> Reisner compared this justification to "arguing for a hundred-mile-per-hour speed limit on the grounds that motorists would spend less time on dangerous highways if they drove twice as fast."<sup>66</sup>

The greater than normal spring runoff on the Teton River actually increased the rate of fill to three or four feet per day several times in April and May. With the reservoir rising rapidly, Robison sent a faxogram to Denver stating that the river outlet works and the spillway gates were not yet functional and asking for advice on this matter. In the mail at the time of the flood, a message from Denver dated June 4, 1976, reassured Robison that "the river outlet works need not be used prior to completion [...] unless problems directly related to filling of the reservoir develop in the foundation, embankment or structures."

The letter did recommend that construction crews should complete these projects as soon as possible.<sup>67</sup> Without construction completed on the spillway and the river works outlet (the construction schedule had the main structure of the dam completed in March, but several other projects remained unfinished at the time of collapse in June), the Bureau possessed no means to control the rate of fill on the reservoir.<sup>68</sup> The sunny and warm

---

<sup>64</sup> Reisner, 398.

<sup>65</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 10-10 to 10-12.

<sup>66</sup> Reisner, 399.

<sup>67</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 10-12.

days in early June quickly melted the snowpack and inundated a Teton Reservoir that had no functional safety valve to release the increasing pressure on the dam.

Before June 3, inspections of the dam and riverbed below the dam showed no signs of abnormal leaks or seepage. On June 3, inspectors observed two small leaks 1,300 and 1,500 feet downstream from the right abutment of the dam.<sup>69</sup> Inspectors carefully completed visual checks on June 4, paying close attention to the north side of the canyon downstream of the right toe of the dam and the right abutment.<sup>70</sup> Inspectors found no new leaks until 7:00 a.m. on June 5, when an inspector spotted leakage 5,200 feet up the right abutment. The inspector informed Robison, who quickly made his way to the dam. Three more leaks sprang up on the actual dam between 8:30 and 9:30 a.m. that Saturday morning, some on the seam of the dam and the right abutment. At this point Robison considered alerting officials in Madison and Fremont counties situated directly below the dam, but, after talking to his superiors in Washington, Denver, and Boise, he decided that the situation did not yet present an emergency.<sup>71</sup>

At 10:15 a.m., a wet spot developed forty feet up the face of the dam near the right abutment and began to leak and erode the embankment. Those near the dam heard a loud roar and the sound of rushing water at 10:30 a.m. with the volume of water leaking visibly increasing. Robison visually inspected the eroding area on the right abutment and saw a tunnel thirty to forty feet in length and six feet in diameter on the face of the dam. He sent two bulldozers to the scene in an attempt to fill the rapidly expanding holes in the

---

<sup>68</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 10-15.

<sup>69</sup> Graham, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure, 11-6 and 11-7.

<sup>71</sup> Graham, 4. Reisner, 402.



dam. Next, he decided to notify the sheriffs of Madison and Fremont counties of potential flooding and a possible need for an evacuation. The bulldozers worked for nearly thirty minutes when they lost traction on the embankment and the drivers leaped to safety as their machines floated off downstream at 11:30 a.m.<sup>72</sup>

While the bulldozer operators frantically tried to fill the burgeoning hole on the face of the dam, a whirlpool developed in the reservoir, fifteen to twenty feet from the dam. Bulldozers on the upstream side of the dam tried to push rock material into the whirlpool without success and Robison removed them at 11:45 a.m., when a sinkhole developed on the downstream face of the dam.<sup>73</sup> At this point, the Bureau could do nothing but observe the dam it built dissolve into the roiling water. At 11:55 a.m., the crest of the dam collapsed and two minutes later the embankment crumbled, spilling the contents of the reservoir down the canyon in enormous, brown waves.<sup>74</sup> In less than two hours, the situation at the Teton Dam went from a lesser concern to a full-blown disaster on a path to destroy everything in the valley.

Robison had notified the sheriffs in Madison and Fremont counties around 11:00 a.m. to evacuate all low-lying areas below the dam, but he had only said “there was a possibility the dam would go but it would ‘go slowly.’”<sup>75</sup> This description of the impending demise of the dam conveyed little sense of urgency and no scope of the potential disaster to the sheriffs, who consequently took no immediate action to warn the people. Others, such as police officials and radio announcers, who witnessed the demise

---

<sup>72</sup> Clements, 8. Graham, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Clements, 8. Graham, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Reisner, 403.

<sup>75</sup> Graham, 11.

of the dam understood the situation better than Robison and tried to vociferously warn people living below the dam.

Warnings about the collapse of the dam came from radio and television broadcasts, phone calls from friends and relatives, and visits from concerned neighbors. Eight miles downstream, the little town of Wilford took the first direct hit from a twenty-foot wall of water spilling out of the canyon. Between 12:20 and 12:30 p.m. the water rushed through Wilford, effectively wiping it off the map. The water ripped 120 of the 154 homes in the town from their foundations and washed them further downstream.<sup>76</sup> Martha Black, a resident of Wilford, had just sat down to lunch when a neighbor pounded on her door and yelled at her “Get out! Get out! Get out! The Teton Dam has burst! The flood is coming!” She and her husband grabbed armfuls of clothes and some keepsakes and drove to safety in St. Anthony.<sup>77</sup>

Most residents of Wilford escaped town before the flood roared in; however, Glen Bedford was not as lucky. Bedford met his in-laws, the Liedings, at his sister-in-law’s home in St. Anthony and saw Mrs. Lieding in the front yard, but not his father-in-law (who was around the back of the house). Bedford raced back to Wilford to look for his father-in-law and grab remaining mementos at the Lieding home. Mr. Lieding chased after him, arriving in Wilford in time to see what appeared to be a fifty-foot wall of water emerging from the canyon only a mile and a half away. He called to Bedford, who told him he would be right behind him on his way to St. Anthony. Beyond recognition among

---

<sup>76</sup> Graham, 24, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Janet Thomas, Bernice McCowin, Mary Tingey, and Margaret Thomas, eds., *That Day in June: Reflections on the Teton Dam Disaster* (Rexburg: Ricks College Press, 1977), 5-6.

the debris, volunteers did not find Bedford's body until eleven days after the flood.<sup>78</sup> The Teton Dam failure took eleven lives over the course of the disaster; including six drowning deaths in Fremont County.<sup>79</sup>

Residents of Sugar City lived twelve miles southwest of the dam. Sugar City resident Donna Webster first heard about the collapse from radio broadcaster Don Ellis, on Rexburg's KRXX at a quarter to noon. Both Donna and her husband expressed little concern over the dam breaking because they had experienced flooding before. Nevertheless, Ellis persisted in yelling warnings from the dam site and imploring people to gather their families and head for higher ground. Donna attributed her survival to Ellis's broadcast. She heeded his warning, and in her confusion, all she could think to bring from home was bowl of bread dough: so she grabbed it and left.<sup>80</sup> At 1:30 that afternoon a fifteen-foot wave of water engulfed Sugar City damaging almost every home in town.<sup>81</sup>

Keith Walker, a resident of Rexburg and the chairman of the Madison County Commissioners, viewed the flood from a plane. In the air, Walker "kept hoping that as big as the valley was, even with that much pressure coming, that the water would spread out and lose its force." Walker approached the crest of the flood just as it spilled over the roof of the Wilford LDS church building, at which point he realized this flood had the potential to be worse than any the valley had ever seen. He radioed back to another county commissioner and described the situation to him. An aerial perspective truly

---

<sup>78</sup> Reisner, 404.

<sup>79</sup> Graham, 8, 10.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas et al., 29-30.

<sup>81</sup> Graham, 8.

captured the horror of horses and cows vainly trying to out run or swim the wall of water, the spectacle of floating homes and cars, and the ugliness of the wave “that didn’t really look like water, it had so much dirt and dust in it. It looked like a big cloud of dust, like a terrific wind storm.”<sup>82</sup>

The largest city in Madison County, Rexburg, lay fifteen miles from the dam.<sup>83</sup> While the rest of the town occupies the valley on the edge of the foothills, Ricks College rested on higher ground overlooking the town. Rexburg had over two hours from the initial warning until the floodwaters rolled through town, so police and neighbors effectively evacuated the area. Most residents sought refuge at Ricks on College Hill where they had a close, unobstructed view of the floodwaters washing away their homes.<sup>84</sup> Warren R. Widdison heard about the failure of the dam from several neighbors just before noon. He thought that they must be misinformed, but decided to verify their story at the fire department. While there, Widdison heard the call come in to evacuate Rexburg. He and his wife moved the contents of their basement to the top floor of their home and loaded their car with emergency supplies. Widdison worked at a bank in town and wanted to drive by to make sure employees had turned off the power and vacated the building. Driving by the bank a man yelled at the Widdisons to leave because just a few blocks away the flood started its rampage through downtown Rexburg. Reaching a safe vantage point, Widdison and his wife watched as at least six feet of water washed through

---

<sup>82</sup> Graham, 25-26.

<sup>83</sup> Graham, 8.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas et al., 119.

Main Street, with rolling barrels, logs, and other debris.<sup>85</sup>

Idaho Falls, sixty-three miles from the dam, had thirteen hours to prepare for the arrival of the floodwaters. Late Saturday and early Sunday sandbagging crews worked rapidly to build up the banks of the Snake River in an effort to control flooding as it went through town. The sandbagging effort effectively prevented the flooding of most homes and businesses near the river. The biggest concern in Idaho Falls became the Broadway Bridge. Debris slammed into the bridge and increased flooding in the vicinity. Crews tried unsuccessfully to blow up the bridge with dynamite. When this did not work, city officials decided to dig emergency channels to divert the floodwaters around the bridge, which secured its survival during the night.<sup>86</sup> The flood continued through Idaho Falls, Shelley, and Blackfoot until it reached the American Falls Reservoir, thirty-six hours later and 150 miles from the dam, where the reservoir easily accommodated the extra water.<sup>87</sup>

Wayne J. Graham, in his 2008 presentation at the Association of the State Dam Safety Officials, declared of the Teton Dam collapse, whether “measured in terms of either dam height or volume of water released, the failure was the worst in U.S. history.”<sup>88</sup> Marc Reisner claimed that the resulting flood was “the second-largest flood in North America since the last Ice Age.”<sup>89</sup> The flood in Rexburg peaked at 6:30 p.m. when

---

<sup>85</sup> Thomas et al., 129-131.

<sup>86</sup> Dylan J. McDonald, *Images of America: The Teton Dam Disaster* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 65.

<sup>87</sup> Graham, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Graham, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Reisner, 403.

the waters began to recede, leaving an unimaginable path of destruction and damage that made the sunny morning of June 5<sup>th</sup> seem like a lifetime ago. Dorothy Hegsted of Rexburg vividly recalled what the Teton left behind when the waters withdrew, “leaving in its wake hundreds of bawling cattle and dead livestock in the streets, stores gutted, houses off their foundations, some moved blocks away, cars leaning against houses, debris and logs piled up.”<sup>90</sup>

Gary Olsen, the director of the Manwaring Center at Ricks College at the time of the flood, called the radio station after he heard about the failure of the dam and told them to announce that “rather than have people just get out of their homes, to come up here to the campus and check in at the Manwaring Center.”<sup>91</sup> Olsen and his staff pulled out large sheets of paper and started writing down the names of the flood victims who poured into the facility. Eventually they gathered all of the available typewriters and began typing the lists. While the water rolled into Rexburg, Olsen started marshalling his resources. He assigned volunteers to set-up chairs for people to sit on, communicated with food services requesting them to have a meal ready for service at 5:00 p.m., and began organizing clothing donations that had already started to come in for flood victims.<sup>92</sup> The LDS Church subsidizes and oversees the operation of Ricks College, now BYU-I. Olsen and his coworkers’ actions demonstrated this impetus experienced by members of the LDS Church to quickly assume leadership roles as the disaster unfolded.

When the flood proved more devastating to the areas below the college than

---

<sup>90</sup> Thomas et al., 140.

<sup>91</sup> Gary Olsen, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 8, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 246, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>92</sup> Gary Olsen, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 8, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 246, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

anyone could have expected, Olsen started assigning people dorm rooms for the night. Those who did not stay in the dorms found temporary shelter with other families in the area whose homes escaped the water or with relatives not far from the floodplain. Some people took in as many as seven other families. Nearly seventeen hundred people spent Saturday night in the dorms or in someone else's home.<sup>93</sup>

Pat Price, the director of foodservices at Ricks, immediately went into action filling pots with water in the event that Ricks lost its water supply. He and his crew then started making soup for dinner that night. Price and his wife stayed up all night preparing soup for the victims and arranging breakfast for the following morning.<sup>94</sup> While Price and his wife worked around the clock to ensure enough food for everyone who showed up to the Manwaring Center, they missed their only opportunity to salvage any personal belongings or ascertain the flood damage to their own home.<sup>95</sup> Price and his wife, both members of the LDS Church, prioritized the welfare of others above their own needs, harkening back to the communal aspects characteristic of Mormonism from its earliest days.

Just hours into the disaster, unique problems began to emerge among the flood victims at the Manwaring Center. Many families with babies and young children sought shelter at Ricks and did not bring enough diapers or baby formula to even make it through the night. Ricks College contacted Max Call, a member of an Idaho Falls stake

---

<sup>93</sup> Gary Olsen, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 8, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 248, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>94</sup> Steven "Pat" Price, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 224, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>95</sup> Steven "Pat" Price, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 225, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

presidency and informed him that they needed diapers and formula quickly. Call and several members of his ward bought all the baby supplies they could find in Idaho Falls, loaded them in a truck and delivered them by Saturday night. Some babies required goat's milk and a quart showed-up anonymously Saturday night along with two goats that they continued to milk in the days to come.<sup>96</sup>

After trying to warn anyone he could reach, Ferron Sonderegger, a Rexburg-area stake president and professor and football coach at Ricks, made his way to the college and tried to locate other area Stake Presidents Keith Peterson and Mark Ricks. He then quickly worked to activate the priesthood leadership of the church following the line of authority characteristic of the Mormon Church in any circumstance. When he could not find them, President Sonderegger went to his office at Ricks and tried calling the LDS Presiding Bishop Victor Brown at church headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah.<sup>97</sup>

Because it was Saturday Bishop Brown was not in, but Sonderegger made contact with someone in the office and told him of the dire situation developing in eastern Idaho. Finally, Quinn Gardner made contact with Sonderegger; he had previously worked on church welfare efforts during a Guatemalan disaster. Gardner asked Sonderegger to report to him every hour in order to stay apprised of the evolving situation. Gardner also asked what Sonderegger thought the flood victims needed immediately. They agreed that

---

<sup>96</sup> Gary Olsen, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 8, 1976, box 2, vol.1 page 250-251, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

<sup>97</sup> The Presiding Bishopric, comprised of the Presiding Bishop and his two counselors, presides over the temporal affairs of the church including its welfare program. H. David Burton and Wm. Gibb Dyer, Jr., "Presiding Bishopric," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1128.



blankets and food would address any urgent concerns in the Rexburg area.<sup>98</sup>

Saturday night, several hours after President Sonderegger's first call, a truck from the LDS Church Welfare System made it into Rexburg and unloaded its contents at the Manwaring Center. Those who took advantage of the dorm rooms at Ricks that night enjoyed clean bedding to cover the bare mattresses in their rooms. The welfare system also provided coats and other clothes to those who only possessed what they were wearing when they escaped the flood. The first truck did not contain enough supplies for everyone in need that night, but truck after truck followed in a constant stream to bring much needed supplies to the displaced population in the disaster area.<sup>99</sup>

Most people went to sleep Saturday night in dry clothes, fed, and in some type of shelter. Friends and neighbors, the Red Cross, local church leadership, or the central church welfare system had met their immediate needs. Nevertheless, Nola Vance of Sugar City, who wrote a memoir of her flood experiences entitled *Safe in a Hayfield: Overcoming the Challenges of the Teton Dam Disaster*, remembered the despair she experienced as she reflected on the sacrifice and work she and her husband had invested to make their farm productive. That evening she wondered, "What did our property look like now? [...] How will this tragedy impact my life?"<sup>100</sup> Not alone with her anger, despair, and disbelief, Vance echoed what many of the flood victims struggled within the darkness of that Saturday night and faced at the dawn of Sunday morning.

---

<sup>98</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, page 42-44, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

<sup>99</sup> Gary Olsen, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 8, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 252, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

<sup>100</sup> Nola T. Vance, *Safe in Hayfield: Overcoming the Challenges of the Teton Dam Disaster*, (Sugar City, ID: Nola T. Vance, 2006), 58.

For Vance and others, the announcement of a conference with Stake Presidents Sonderegger, Ricks, and Peterson in the Hart Auditorium at Ricks brought hope. The gathered assembly sang the LDS hymn “Come, Come Ye Saints,” written by William Clayton to commemorate the sufferings and achievements of the early Mormon pioneers who left their settlement in Nauvoo to escape persecution and find a peaceful home in the West. Vance took comfort in phrases found in the second verse:

Why should we think to earn a great reward,  
 If we now shun the fight?  
 Gird up your loins, fresh courage take,  
 Our God will never us forsake;  
 And soon we'll have this tale to tell—  
 All is well! All is well!<sup>101</sup>

The speakers at the conference urged their listeners to work, rebuild, and record their spiritual, humorous, and miraculous experiences in the coming weeks and months. Speakers also encouraged the assembly to start cleaning up their homes and communities and not wait for government assistance. President Sonderegger had contacted the LDS Church headquarters and it knew of the circumstances of the people in the Upper Snake River Valley. Vance reported that the morale of the audience received a boost when they knew the church had assured its help.<sup>102</sup> Members of the Mormon Church believed strongly that their doctrines of self-reliance and independence would successfully guide them through this tragedy. They willingly put their faith in the church rather than the federal government.

Before the dam even broke the local organizational system of the LDS church went into action to address the emerging disaster situation. This Mormon community

---

<sup>101</sup> Vance, 80.

<sup>102</sup> Vance, 79-81.

activated several levels of church leadership to meet the needs of the flood victims. Max Call, a local priesthood leader, organized other priesthood holders to bring needed supplies into Rexburg. Stake presidents and bishops in the area telephoned warnings to those in their stakes and wards, and after the waters receded checked to make sure everyone in their jurisdiction (members or not) had a place to stay Saturday night. President Sonderegger initiated communication with the main welfare system of the church, which had previous experience in aiding disaster victims, and brought supplies only hours after the breach of the dam. The LDS-owned and affiliated Ricks College put its entire campus at the disposal of flood victims and later the private and governmental agencies that would come to help in the ensuing recovery period.

The victims of the Teton Dam disaster had no idea what the future held for them. Many did not even know if their houses had survived that Saturday night. Yet, all of the available resources of their local church and its leadership reassured the Mormons of eastern Idaho that night. The attitude of wariness toward the federal government and outside agencies espoused by the church for over a century continued to influence members in the summer of 1976. Mormons in eastern Idaho placed unwavering faith and trust in the full support of LDS Church headquarters to assist them on their road to physical and spiritual recovery.

Having the full support of the church during the recovery process not only provided victims of the flood with a sense of security, but they also sensed an opportunity to demonstrate to their non-member neighbors, outside agencies, and the nation the value of their welfare system and priesthood organization. President Sonderegger reminded Bruce Blumell in an interview shortly following the disaster “we should never overlook

the non-members who have been in here. This has been a great fellowshiping opportunity.”<sup>103</sup> Church leaders perceived that the disaster provided an invaluable opportunity to put Mormonism in a positive light. The Sunday meeting also showed to members that the church would direct the terms of the recovery process. They would make no changes to how the hierarchy of the priesthood functioned and would play the traditional role of the federal government by being the primary agency in organizing all facets of post-disaster restoration. This approach added a new chapter to the typical American disaster response and a perceived shift in the history of Mormonism in America.

---

<sup>103</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 40, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

## CHAPTER 4: MORMONISM IN TRANSITION

Despite the amount of property damaged and the vast portion of land affected by the collapse of the Teton Dam, this disaster has received very little treatment beyond minor analysis in larger works about the Bureau of Reclamation, western water management, or general accounts of Mormon history. The minimal loss of life may lead many historians to misjudge the magnitude of this disaster and prevent further investigation. In David L. Crowder's work, *Rexburg, Idaho: The First One Hundred Years, 1883-1983*, the 1976 dam failure received only slight mention with the author giving a passing account of the dam failure and recovery effort.<sup>104</sup> Other works, such as Dylan J. McDonald's *The Teton Dam Disaster*, provide an excellent description of the events of June 5, but do not offer any type of historical analysis. The Ricks College Press produced *That Day in June: Reflections on the Teton Dam Disaster*, a compilation of experiences by those in the affected area from the oral history interviews conducted by historians from Ricks College, Utah State University, and the LDS Church. *That Day in June* relies on the impressions of victims without providing much analysis.

Historical examination of the Teton Dam failure may be limited, but the oral history interviews held in BYU Idaho's Special Collections provide myriad perspectives on the causes of the failure, of attempts to flee the rampaging waters, about the early days of the recovery, and on the long-term issues that survivors faced following the disaster.

---

<sup>104</sup> David L. Crowder, *Rexburg, Idaho: The First One Hundred Years, 1883-1983*, (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1983), 265-272.

Local residents provided most of the oral histories and many of these residents claimed membership in the church. Bruce D. Blumell, the official LDS Church Historian in 1976, also conducted a series of interviews for the church, mostly of priesthood leaders at various levels (i.e. stake presidencies or bishoprics). In addition to church leaders, he included the representatives of several government agencies sent to the Rexburg area. The analysis here relies largely on these oral history interviews to describe the unique Mormon perspective of this event and on the perception of those outside the church and their response to a largely Mormon community.

Marc Reisner, Donald Worster, Wayne J. Graham, and Michael C. Robinson offer insightful analyses about the significance of the Teton Dam disaster and what it meant to the history of the Bureau of Reclamation in their respective works. Robinson and Graham's examinations of the disaster are more sensitive toward the Bureau. Robinson's argument in *Water for the West: The Bureau of Reclamation, 1902-1977*, asserted that the responsibility of the dam failure rested with the Bureau, but this event led to improvements in oversight on their future projects. Robinson referred to the era following Teton as "reclamation in transition," admitting that the credibility of the Bureau had suffered. The Bureau had learned from Teton, Robinson asserted, and the vast changes the Bureau had implemented in the western United States improved the land making it more habitable through irrigation projects.<sup>105</sup>

Wayne J. Graham echoed Robinson's cautiously upbeat tone in his paper "The Teton Dam Failure-An Effective Warning and Evacuation," presented at the Association of State Dam Safety Officials 2008 conference. Graham supported findings that held the

---

<sup>105</sup> Robinson, 106-109.

Bureau's design of the dam at fault for its failure. Nevertheless, he chose to focus his analysis on the timely recognition by the Bureau that their dam was in imminent danger of collapsing, which allowed for an effective evacuation and minimized the loss of life. Even when admitting that the Bureau violated its own policy for filling the dam, Graham still praised the team on site for frequently monitoring the area for any sign that the rapidly filling reservoir could jeopardize the structural integrity of the dam.<sup>106</sup>

Marc Reisner provided one of the most compelling and scathing accounts of the failure of the Teton Dam in *Cadillac Desert*. For Reisner, Teton signaled the end to a heyday of Bureau dam building. His research revealed that dam sites had become more questionable, but with the Bureau's impeccable reputation, not many people involved in these projects questioned their decision-making.<sup>107</sup> Reisner condemned the Bureau for the silence it maintained after the failure of Teton, remarking that no Bureau employees lost their jobs in the wake of four different investigations into the collapse of the dam. Idaho politicians, Mormons, and western water users also faced Reisner's acerbic assessment of their desire to rebuild the Teton Dam at its original site. The Bureau and its supporters, according to Reisner, had no understanding about the environmental limits of the area or ability of technology to overcome these limits.<sup>108</sup>

Donald Worster, in his work *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, devoted less analysis on the meaning of the Teton Dam failure than Reisner, but essentially agreed with Reisner's denunciation of water-hungry westerners.

---

<sup>106</sup> Graham, 23.

<sup>107</sup> Reisner, 383.

<sup>108</sup> Reisner, 408-409.

“A tragedy like Teton Dam could give no one satisfaction, but it could usefully suggest that the hydraulic society had a misplaced, dangerous confidence in its mastery, through concrete, steel, and earth, over nature.”<sup>109</sup> Worster viewed Teton as a warning, convinced that the hubris of the Bureau, other dam building agencies, and western states would easily permit another tragedy to happen in their pursuit of greater control over natural resources.

Several historians studying this disaster have looked at the unique religious perspective on the dam failure through the lens of Mormon doctrines. Not many of the LDS residents in the area experienced any sort of premonition or foreboding that the dam would collapse, but numerous members of the church believed that miracles and spiritual lessons followed the receding floodwaters. Kent Marlor, the Operations Director of Civil Defense and church member, believed that the flood taught victims humility and fostered a desire among church members to better prepare themselves for future disasters and difficult situations.<sup>110</sup> Most members of the church believed that the timing of the disaster showed divine intervention. President of the LDS Church at the time of the disaster, Spencer W. Kimball, maintained that the flood occurring in the middle of the day showed divine mercy and gratefully declared, “thanks has been to our Heavenly Father that we have come out of it in large measure without the loss of lives.”<sup>111</sup> Most Mormons supported the idea that the dam failed due to human error rather than divine punishment. Dale Nicholls, interviewed following the flood, believed that they were “not

---

<sup>109</sup> Worster, 309.

<sup>110</sup> J. Kent Marlor, interviewed by David L. Crowder, July 7, 1977, box 7, folder 19, page 26-28, MSS1 2, BYUISC

<sup>111</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, speech June 13, 1976, Rexburg, ID. The Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Church History Library, MS 3628.



being punished for anything, that is not why the dam collapsed.” He believed that if “we lived right and do the things that we are supposed to, as far as the church goes, it would be a blessing to us.”<sup>112</sup> For LDS members residing in the Upper Snake River Valley, this disaster signaled an opportunity to make positive changes in their lives. Other church members supposed God allowed for this disaster to serve as a warning to vigilantly prepare both spiritually and temporally for future trials of faith similar to the Teton Dam disaster.

Brent Kinghorn, an administrator at Ricks, outlined several lessons he learned from the recovery effort, shared by many other Mormons in the area, such as a need for increased humility, greater attention to family, the importance of supporting the community, and a reaffirmation of the goodness of humanity.<sup>113</sup> The oral histories of this disaster reveal these central themes as the narratives that dominated LDS residents’ understanding of this catastrophic event. Mormon leaders and members wanted this tragedy to be a triumph in order to encourage a positive perception of the church by its own members and those not of their faith.

While many historians have used Teton to criticize the Bureau or western water usage, scholars of Mormon history have used this disaster for starkly different purposes. In addition to the influence of Mormon theology on perceptions of the disaster, Mormon historians Leonard J. Arrington, Davis Bitton, F. Ross Peterson, and Bruce D. Blumell have analyzed the evacuation, emergency, and recovery phases of this disaster to reveal the role the LDS Church played during and following the disaster. These historians

---

<sup>112</sup> Dale Darnell Nicholls, box 7, folder 30, page 7, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>113</sup> Brent Kinghorn, box 7, folder 12, pages 22-23, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

declared it a story of success for the Mormon Church. All four generally agreed that despite the extensive damage to property and the local landscape, the Teton Dam failure provided an opportunity for the LDS Church to promote a positive image of its welfare system and leadership organization to members and those organizations and leaders outside the church.

Arrington and Bitton supported this positive view of easy cooperation between the Mormon Church members and the government. *The Mormon Experience* portrays the charity and self-sufficiency of the Mormons with regard to making the work of the federal agencies more efficient and effective following the disaster.<sup>114</sup> F. Ross Peterson defended this perspective in his address presented at the 1982 Utah State University Annual Faculty Honor Lecture entitled “The Teton Dam Disaster: Tragedy or Triumph?” Peterson acknowledged the tragedy of those who died in the flood and the catastrophic level of damage to property and the environment, but also concluded that the dam failure resulted in a triumph of “volunteerism, government, and religion [in which] a sense of community was maintained.”<sup>115</sup> Peterson’s conclusions differ vastly from those of Reisner or Worster, who saw the dam failure as a blight on human history. Peterson blatantly disagreed with this position and finished his lecture claiming, “The Teton Dam story [...] will contribute to the glory of our past.”

Using the thirty-eight interviews he conducted in 1976, Blumell analyzed how a

---

<sup>114</sup> Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 278.

<sup>115</sup> F. Ross Peterson, “The Teton Dam Disaster: Tragedy or Triumph?” (Lecture presented at the Sixty-Sixth Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities at Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 1982) 24.

largely LDS community responded to a disaster of this magnitude.<sup>116</sup> He concluded that the Mormon community lengthened the amount of time that people typically behaved altruistically following a disaster due to their emphasis on the welfare of the community over the individual. He also echoed the prevailing opinion among church members that Teton provided an opportunity for the church to test its welfare system. Blumell found several areas where the church could improve its disaster response approach, from acquiring a helicopter to including the Relief Society (a women's organization within the church) more in exclusively addressing the needs of disaster victims.<sup>117</sup> Blumell found some obvious shortcomings in the LDS response, but gave measured praise to the church for its successful handling of the Teton Dam disaster.

Previous historians who have addressed this disaster have affirmed the desire of the church to prove to members and nonmembers that it could effectively work with outside agencies and comprehensively support its own membership. Elder Melvin J. Ballard of the First Presidency in 1949 explained that one of the roles of the church's welfare system was to gain a positive outside response. Speaking of another disaster, Ballard claimed, "The Church rose magnificently to the great emergency and put into operation a welfare program which at once attracted the attention and favorable comment of the entire nation. Nothing else has ever brought to this Church so much favorable publicity as has this program."<sup>118</sup> The church has used the positive aspects of this disaster response in a narrative of cooperation, self-reliance, and a new level of

---

<sup>116</sup> Blumell, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Blumell, 39-41.

<sup>118</sup> Melvin J. Ballard quoted in Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion: The Story of Church Welfare Since 1930*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 43.

accommodation not known in the nineteenth century church. This narrative, while somewhat accurate, glosses over the reality of Arrington's hypothesis relating to this disaster, that the changes were only superficial. The church did work with government agencies, but many times dictated the terms, used the priesthood to carry out secular tasks, and mediated most of the interactions between local members and government programs. The church intended to change nothing, save its image, and protect itself and members from government and outside influences.

## CHAPTER 5: MAINTAINING THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND INDEPENDENCE OF THE LDS CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS

Despite having almost no warning about the impending disaster and no notion of the scope of the tragedy, the LDS Church, Red Cross, and local and federal government agencies responded quickly to the Teton Dam flood. During what sociologist Allen H. Burton terms the “emergency phase” of the disaster in his work *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*, the LDS community in the Rexburg area pulled together, following the Mormon tendency to work in a close community.<sup>119</sup> When other agencies arrived to respond to the disaster they found themselves confronted with a unique cultural situation. The historical relationship between the LDS Church and government institutions had been tense, leading both sides to proceed with caution when aiding victims of the disaster. Working together during the first two weeks following the disaster, church and secular leaders expressed their new appreciation for each other’s efforts to rebuild the flood communities and support the victims.

LDS Church Welfare Services had aided in several disasters before the Teton Dam failure. It sent food, emergency supplies, and medicine to Chile in 1960 following an earthquake and assisted flood victims in Utah, Idaho, and Nevada throughout the

---

<sup>119</sup> Allen H. Burton, *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*, (Garden City, NY: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1969), 49.

1960s.<sup>120</sup> Their first comprehensive and noteworthy emergency response involved the Teton Dam disaster, where they had to address the initial emergency phase and handle a long-term recovery period with a high percentage of affected church members. The church succeeded in securing praise for its work in eastern Idaho. Yet, a closer examination reveals only superficial accommodation of other parties involved in the recovery effort and a difficulty of members and church leaders in forsaking deeply entrenched Mormon beliefs and practices. The tendency to value community above individual welfare, the importance of self-reliance rather than taking a perceived “handout,” and the church’s dominant role in influencing the lives of its members demonstrated an adherence to the original doctrinal principles of the church.

Relying too much on government aid and outside support by Mormons during the Great Depression led Heber J. Grant, then president of the church, to announce the organization of the Church Security Plan (later referred to as the Welfare Plan or System) during an April 1936 general meeting of the church membership. He intended this organization to combat dependence among the members on federal relief and aid programs introduced in the 1930s. One of the responsibilities of the church, according to Grant, involved taking care of the temporal needs of its members. Tithing and fast offering donations would finance this welfare plan where local wards and stakes would assist local members first and then send any surplus to church headquarters where it could distribute it to other areas in need.<sup>121</sup> The foundation of the program rested on

---

<sup>120</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, “Crisis in Identity,” in *Mormonism and American Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 179.

<sup>121</sup> Members of the church designate the first Sunday of every month a day of fasting and donate the value of the meals missed, or more, in cash to a fund that their bishop utilizes

explicitly providing opportunities for the jobless to work, not only to help them earn an income, but to protect their sense of self-worth in the community.<sup>122</sup>

The Church Security Plan sought to help develop the spirituality of the members of the church. The First Presidency agreed that addressing the temporal concerns of its members provided the best method to bolster spiritual growth within the church. They believed that the Security Plan allowed the Saints to preserve their independence and self-respect by helping people help themselves. Above all, claimed the First Presidency, “Our primary purpose was to set up, in so far as it might be possible, a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with [and] the evils of the dole be abolished.”<sup>123</sup>

The church began construction in 1938 on a series of buildings to accommodate its new welfare plan collectively referred to as Welfare Square. It built a root cellar, cannery, a bishop’s storehouse (similar to a supermarket where those in need can shop with a bishop’s order, an allowance that permitted them get necessities without paying money), milk-processing plant, and grain elevator. Welfare Square produced all of its own goods: food products, shoes and clothes, and furniture. To construct and staff Welfare Square, the church employed members, providing more jobs to the Mormon community.<sup>124</sup> The willingness of members to embrace the new welfare plan by the 1960s greatly pleased church leaders, and they claimed that it had unified the church and

---

to help the needy in his ward. Isaac C. Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 501.

<sup>122</sup> Rudd, 39-42.

<sup>123</sup> Rudd, 45.

<sup>124</sup> Rudd, 65-76.

increased spiritual growth from the top down.<sup>125</sup> After successfully taking members through the Depression, the welfare plan looked beyond its own community to aiding victims of natural disasters and communities struggling with supplying basic needs throughout the world.

The welfare plan successfully sustained members of the church both temporally and spiritually by allowing them to address their own needs in a system devised by the church. The hierarchy of the church also believed that they gained positive attention from the welfare plan after decades of negative press, persecution, and struggles with the local and federal governments. Leonard Arrington discussed the identity issues that Mormons faced in the twentieth century, especially in adapting their church programs to the evolving lives of its members. Arrington cited the welfare system as one of these adjustments in Mormon culture that successfully helped bring the Mormon Church into a constructive relationship with those within and outside the church.<sup>126</sup>

Church welfare supplies and personnel arrived the night of the Teton Dam disaster and commenced in supporting the work that Ricks College did to help flood victims. Stake presidents in the area primarily focused on keeping all of the various agencies efficient and organized and provided a local connection to the flood victims. This allowed church welfare system from Salt Lake City to direct its efforts to ensuring all involved parties handled the recovery in a manner that agreed with church teachings and doctrine. This also provided the welfare system with a major opportunity to demonstrate on a larger stage its capabilities in an emergency scenario. The church used

---

<sup>125</sup> Rudd, 93.

<sup>126</sup> Arrington, "Crisis in Identity," 176-178.



this prospect to foster positive interactions with non-members or critics of the church through an effective and comprehensive disaster response program.

Richard “Dick” Barth, a member of the Church Disaster Committee and a supervisor of bulk storage and commodities within the Bishop’s Storehouse System, arrived in Rexburg Saturday night with the first welfare truck from Salt Lake. The Church Disaster Committee formed shortly before or around an earthquake in Guatemala early in 1976 its initial experience of providing relief in an emergency disaster situation.<sup>127</sup> The Teton Dam flood provided the first major test of the Church Disaster Committee because of its proximity to Salt Lake and the uniquely high concentration of Mormons in eastern Idaho.

Barth quickly realized that the scope of the disaster was unparalleled in terms of property destruction. The welfare system began sending food and clothing from its warehouses in the Salt Lake area. In accordance with Mormon welfare beliefs of providing work for those seeking assistance, most of the labor involved with distributing the items to those in need came from the local community. Too many volunteers quickly became a problem for Barth, who did not have enough tasks for everyone to perform.<sup>128</sup>

During the first few days, those working with Barth to distribute food, clothing, and other necessities did not completely conform to church welfare protocol and skipped filling out Bishop’s orders allowing people to take what they needed for immediate needs. Bishop’s orders are forms filled out by a bishop and ward members or families

---

<sup>127</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 31-32, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>128</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 34, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

who require necessities from the Bishop's storehouse. The bishop and individual members decide together what items are essential and the bishop provides a signed form of what they can obtain from the welfare system. After victims had their initial needs met local church members and non-members alike used Bishop's orders to obtain various commodities from the welfare system.<sup>129</sup>

The church looked beyond the basic needs of its distressed members to address all aspects of their lives. Members who had sons or daughters currently serving proselytizing missions for the church temporarily lost their ability to financially support their missionaries, so the welfare system stepped in to make the payments.<sup>130</sup> The welfare system assumed all transportation costs and provided all their own labor from Welfare Square in Salt Lake City to the Manwaring Center at Ricks. Barth also included in the total of church expenditures for this disaster any expenses that Ricks College incurred over its normal operating costs.<sup>131</sup>

The church carefully tried to ensure that it addressed all the needs of its members, however it also tried to help community members not of their faith. A bishop's responsibility lay within his ward boundaries and consisted of all people who lived in his vicinity regardless of membership status within the church, including those with no affiliation with the church at all. Nonmembers theoretically had the same access to welfare commodities supplied by the church, the facilities and meals provided by Ricks,

---

<sup>129</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 35, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 37, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>131</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 36-37, MSS1 2, BYUISC

and the support system that members within the church enjoyed.<sup>132</sup> Church members understood that Christian principles inherent in Mormon doctrine compelled them to make certain that their neighbors had their needs met regardless of their religious affiliations. Providing for nonmembers also served the less altruistic purpose of encouraging a positive view of church members, doctrines, and the welfare system.

The fear of government welfare programs that developed within Mormonism from its beginnings and persisted into the 1970s quickly became an issue following the dam failure. Governor Cecil Andrus visited eastern Idaho a week after the disaster, touring the flooded areas and speaking to the people in a meeting with LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball. Governor Andrus sensed that people in this vicinity struggled to accept aid from the government and other agencies. He spoke about this issue with the president of Ricks College, Henry B. Eyring, following the meeting. He told Eyring to explain to the LDS members in the area that the disaster presented a special circumstance where the government owed the people. He also asked President Eyring for a written explanation of the church's official policy on welfare so that he could inform the government agencies to conform to those standards. Eyring observed that Governor Andrus recognized that the church lacked clarity in its guidelines pertaining to government welfare and needed to quickly solidify its position.<sup>133</sup> Andrus' recommendations that government agencies conform to Mormon protocols demonstrated his desire to accommodate the unique needs found in this region.

---

<sup>132</sup> Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 10, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>133</sup> Henry B. Eyring, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 211, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

Shortly after Governor Andrus' remarks about Mormon reluctance to accept government welfare, the church made clear its stance on welfare assistance from outside the church in a June 15, 1976, letter to stake presidents and bishops in Idaho. It reaffirmed their counsel that members should not accept any type of welfare not earned through work. They continued with specific direction for those involved in the Teton Dam disaster stating that the church anticipated that it could meet the immediate needs of its members and "encouraged [members] to look to the Church rather than to other sources for immediate relief of this kind." The First Presidency did feel that accepting loans, payments, or employment from the government was fitting in this situation, leaving any specific situations to the discretion of the individual and possibly his or her bishop. The final warning issued by President Kimball cautioned that dependence on government welfare "is not only demoralizing but is unworthy of members of the Church" and cited a scripture from the Mormon canonical work *The Doctrine and Covenants*, 78:18, "Through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you,...the Church may stand independent."<sup>134</sup> The First Presidency's stance allowed for some outside welfare but in the same letter, they reinforced the caution members exhibited toward the government and its welfare and public assistance programs.

Those working with the Red Cross immediately noticed a difference in response between previous disaster victims and the Mormon population of eastern Idaho. The Red Cross established its main base of operations in Idaho Falls on Saturday night, and then established relief centers in Rexburg and Roberts. Corry Tanner, a disaster coordinator

---

<sup>134</sup> The First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to stake presidents in Idaho in box 10, folder 4, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

for the Salt Lake City division, explained the role of the Red Cross generally and with respect to the Teton Dam flood during a 1977 interview by Bruce Blumell. At the relief centers flood victims received counseling about different types of aid available to help them deal with their losses from the disaster. In Rexburg, Ricks College had addressed most of the immediate housing and food needs, so the Red Cross worked to supplement the efforts at the school.<sup>135</sup> The Red Cross played a larger role in providing food in Menan and Roberts, smaller towns that had a delayed response to the disaster when floodwater three to four feet deep formed a lake rather than receding.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to providing meals and food for people in the flood plain, the Red Cross assisted with clothing and other basic needs by providing comfort kits filled with toiletries and disbursing orders that functioned like checks or cash at stores in the area where victims could purchase necessities. The Red Cross paid merchants for disbursing orders they fulfilled, believing that having new clothes rather than used items raises the self-esteem of disaster victims. This system helped to financially support local businesses that suffered from the disaster as well.<sup>137</sup> Red Cross workers and volunteers found that although many people living below the dam had only the clothes on their back, they hesitated to take any type of aid from the Red Cross.

The First Presidency of the church had made it clear to members that they should utilize the church welfare system first to fulfill their needs. Some members struggled to

---

<sup>135</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 160, MSS I 2, BYUISC.

<sup>136</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 160, 163, MSS I 2, BYUISC.

<sup>137</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 162, 166, MSS I 2, BYUISC.

justify taking anything from a non-church agency, an issue that many Red Cross and government workers from outside the area found surprising. The honesty of those affected by the Teton Dam disaster also struck those who had participated in other relief efforts where many people tried to secure more aid than they needed.<sup>138</sup> Although the Red Cross is not a government agency, workers sensed an undercurrent of wariness of what victims perceived as any type of government involvement or assistance.<sup>139</sup>

Initially the workers in the Red Cross and government agencies from outside the area supposed that the people involved in the Teton Dam disaster lacked gratitude for the assistance they provided.<sup>140</sup> Rexburg East Stake President Keith L. Peterson admitted that in a meeting the day after the flood at Ricks, local church leadership had a rocky beginning to their relationship with the Red Cross. Peterson declared that members in the area had availed themselves of too much aid from the Red Cross. While Peterson stated that many church members had contributed to the Red Cross in the past, justifying some assistance from outside the church, he argued that “[the Red Cross] distributed too much money here, and our people took too much money on clothing allowances and other things. I think over a million dollars was the last figure I heard.”<sup>141</sup> Even though many Mormons in the area had actually donated to the Red Cross, some church leaders maintained that members should not utilize the Red Cross as their primary source of

---

<sup>138</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 169, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>139</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 167-168, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>140</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 168, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>141</sup> Keith L. Peterson, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 27, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

relief. Local leaders followed the First Presidency's directive regarding welfare and reinforced the aloof, closed sense of community that dominated the early years of Mormonism.

Notwithstanding the tenuous beginning between the LDS Church and the Red Cross, both sides admitted that once communication improved, it fostered a greater appreciation of each other's contributions to the relief effort. Keith Peterson acknowledged that the Red Cross could "do some things that the Church can't do" and that the church needed to learn how to interact with various other emergency relief agencies in the future.<sup>142</sup> Tanner attributed the Mormon hesitancy to accept aid to an inability on the victims' part to comprehend the magnitude of the disaster and the failure of the church to indicate clearly its position on accepting welfare and other types of non-church aid. Ultimately Tanner believed that most of the Red Cross workers accepted the unique situation presented by a largely Mormon population. He was even impressed when people returned their unused disbursement orders either because there were inadvertent duplications or they realized that their losses were not as bad as originally thought.<sup>143</sup> According to Tanner, the Red Cross eventually sensed that they had worked successfully in this distinctive environment. Tanner's interview also shows that despite some improvement, the Mormon residents remained cautious of outside assistance and their religious leaders sustained their attitude.

Even in situations where interactions between the local population and

---

<sup>142</sup> Keith L. Peterson, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 27, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>143</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 167-169, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

government agencies seemed to work smoothly, church leaders later regretted having to rely on that agency at all. Temporary housing quickly became a top priority of the recovery effort due to the massive loss of property and the federal government sent HUD to address this need. Bruce Blumell interviewed Carlos Renteria, the director of application assistance for the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) at the Teton Dam disaster, to understand the role of this agency and its reception in a largely Mormon community. Renteria had represented HUD on approximately fourteen disasters before his experience in Idaho in 1976 and explained to Blumell how HUD operated in a typical disaster situation. Disaster victims whose homes sustained enough damage to make them unlivable filed an application with HUD. An inspector verified the level of damage; if it was severe, HUD made other housing arrangements, mobile homes in this particular case. If the home sustained minor damage, HUD assisted the homeowner in making minimal repairs, bringing the home to a livable condition so that the homeowner could reside on the premises while continuing to restore it.<sup>144</sup>

Without phones or people living at regular addresses, HUD found it difficult to locate, communicate with, and assist victims in the disaster area. The organization of the local LDS Church aided HUD in overcoming these setbacks. Stake presidents and bishops had already met with the members of their wards and stakes and compiled a list reporting their assessment of homes in their respective jurisdictions. Using this list, HUD visited the homes before people even had to apply, accompanied by local church leaders so that when applications did come in they had only to verify their findings on the list and

---

<sup>144</sup> Carlos Renteria interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 78-80, MSS1 2, BYUISC.



could accelerate the process of getting individuals into a more stable living situation. Renteria affirmed that HUD was “pretty lucky” with this particular situation and he praised the LDS Church for being “so well organized.”<sup>145</sup>

HUD processed all eligible applications for some type of temporary housing in an astounding sixty days. By December 1976, HUD had reduced its caseload by half with only twelve hundred families or individuals continuing to rely on the organization for their housing needs. The local HUD office director in Rexburg, Victor Gonzalez, attributed this exceptional efficiency to “the assisted families in this area [who] have exhibited a great deal of independence and self-sufficiency, and with their help we may finish our job early.”<sup>146</sup> The Mormon influence on the response went beyond the general and local church leaders to the members who closely adhered to the LDS tenets of self-reliance and independence. The church leadership streamlined HUD’s process by providing a vital pathway for quick communication between the agency and the people in Rexburg while the victims and outside volunteers worked rapidly to restore any homes that could be repaired quickly, freeing up HUD temporary properties.

A few minor instances of people becoming impatient with the HUD process occurred, but residents below the Teton Dam expressed their pleasure with the work that HUD did and the caliber of personnel who served them. The LDS Church also agreed that its relationship with HUD had worked smoothly and provided excellent service to flood victims. However, some local church leaders perceived that Mormon independence

---

<sup>145</sup> Carlos Renteria interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 85, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>146</sup> “HUD reduces temporary caseload by half since disaster,” December 20, 1976, box 1, folder 3, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

in a disaster could be increased in the future, eliminating the need for any aid from outside agencies such as HUD. Stake President Howard Hiram of the Idaho Falls South Stake declared that “we have had an opportunity to put the Church to a test, if you will, so far as their abilities to help one another. I am totally convinced that the Church can do whatever it wants, because of the great faith of the Saints.”<sup>147</sup> While Renteria and HUD generally found their involvement in a population dominated by Mormons successful, the church leadership continued with caution to involve themselves with outside agencies. Church leaders saw any loss of self-sufficiency by the church as a weakness that needed rectification in the future.

While church leadership and many members struggled to accept any type of aid from non-LDS or government organizations, they found government loans acceptable. The Small Business Administration (SBA) moved into the Rexburg area to promote the recovery of local businesses with government financial assistance. By paying off the existing mortgage of the business and then providing a new thirty-year loan at an affordable interest rate, a business affected by the disaster could literally start over. The church readily supported aid of this type because leaders saw a distinction between loans and “handouts” and used local priesthood to assist this agency as well.<sup>148</sup> Although people generally believed that the Bureau of Reclamation would have to make full financial restitution, including paying off any SBA loans, the loans promoted a quicker physical and economic recovery in the Upper Snake River Valley. Dan Ward, the

---

<sup>147</sup> Howard G. Hiram interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 21, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

<sup>148</sup> “Temporary bishop’s storehouse has resources for flood victims,” *The Post Register* (Idaho Falls), June 17, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

Regional Director of SBA from Seattle, asserted that the church ultimately helped the SBA and other agencies perform their duties in eastern Idaho. He stated, “Never before in a disaster have federal agencies had access to so much volunteer help in providing information, dispelling rumors, locating disaster victims, assisting with loss documentation and inpediting [*sic*, expediting?] applications for financial help.”<sup>149</sup>

Although LDS Church policies and general sentiment from the leadership clearly resisted attempts by outside organizations to provide material help to members in eastern Idaho, the nature of the Teton Dam disaster required some accommodation by entrenched sentiments of self-sufficiency. The process to determine what the government would do financially for the victims began on June 8, 1976, when the Under Secretary of the Interior D. Kent Frizzel established the Interior Teton Dam Failure Review Group (IRG) to investigate the causes of the failure. The U.S. Department of the Interior and the State of Idaho (Independent Panel) also commissioned an investigation into the contributing factors of the failure of the Teton Dam. The IRG published its report in April of 1977, and the Independent Panel’s report issued its report in January of 1977.<sup>150</sup> Interim reports shortly after the failure of the dam, issued on July 14, 1976, provided a hypothesis based on initial tests at the dam site that the dam failed at a design level. The reliance on the elaborate grouting curtain “inhibited adoption of other design features that could have prevented the failure.” Ultimately the design of the dam proved inadequate for the unique geological issues present in the Teton Canyon.<sup>151</sup> Because both panels attributed

---

<sup>149</sup> “SBA emergency aid program in Teton disaster receive plaudit,” *The Post Register* (Idaho Falls), July 15, 1976, Box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>150</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, 1.

the failure of the dam to a faulty design rather than an earthquake or other natural occurrence, they asserted that the Bureau of Reclamation and ultimately the federal government must bear financial responsibility for the damage caused by the failure. In 1976, the Teton Dam failure was the worst dam disaster in terms of property damage in history, with the bill estimated at one billion dollars in 1976.<sup>152</sup>

After the initial report, people began to realize that the federal government was entirely at fault for the disaster and wondered when the government would reimburse the victims for their losses. Some, like Stake President Keith Peterson, believed the government would find any way it could to avoid financial responsibility for the catastrophe.<sup>153</sup> U.S. Senator from Idaho James A. McClure lobbied hard in Washington, D.C. along with Representative George Hansen for full financial restitution for the Teton Dam disaster victims. After declaring five Idaho counties disaster areas, President Gerald Ford then asked Congress for legislation that would provide two hundred million dollars to victims immediately. Ten days later, the federal government began to administer the funds in eastern Idaho.<sup>154</sup> Senator McClure knew that the initial payment would not come close to covering the total losses in the Upper Snake River Valley.<sup>155</sup> While the initial reports by the federal government and the Bureau clearly indicated that they were

---

<sup>151</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, 103.

<sup>152</sup> "Teton Dam failure could be worst dam disaster in history," *The Post-Register* (Idaho Falls), July 16, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>153</sup> Keith Peterson interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 23, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>154</sup> "President Ford signs Teton Dam bill," *The Post-Register* (Idaho Falls), September 7, 1976, box 1, folder, 9, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>155</sup> "McClure requests periodic flood compensation check," July 15, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

responsible for the damage, President Ford never admitted any fault on the part of the government. He stated, “No government has the power to eliminate tragedy from human experience, but government can and government should act quickly to minimize the pain of a great disaster and help to begin the healing process.”<sup>156</sup>

On September 7, 1976, President Ford signed the Teton Dam Bill; leaving the amount of money the government would compensate the people open to allow a full restitution for flood victims. President Mark G. Ricks of the Rexburg Stake maintained that most eastern Idahoans changed their negative view of the federal government when they sensed they had received more compensation than they had anticipated earlier in the summer.<sup>157</sup>

Providing compensation in a highly concentrated Mormon population also presented a unique set of issues. The nature of the disaster itself provided one of the first instances with the reimbursement of disaster victims due to culpability of the federal government. The head claims officer in Rexburg asserted that he believed as high as ninety percent of the claims were legitimate with about ten percent considered questionable.<sup>158</sup> Many Mormons still expressed some reluctance in accepting this type of money, despite being entitled to it under the circumstances. Stake President Keith Peterson reported that many government claims workers conceded that many people did

---

<sup>156</sup> Gerald Ford, “Remarks upon signing the Teton Dam Disaster Bill,” September 7, 1976, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6308#axzz1bx6ubXjV> (accessed October 26, 2011).

<sup>157</sup> Mark Ricks interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 39, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>158</sup> Mark Ricks interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 39-40, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

not request enough money to cover their losses. Peterson claimed that government officials, early in the process, expressed concern that some of the older people had not considered inflation and would not request enough money to replace the lost items at their current price.<sup>159</sup>

Government officials may have agreed that the claims process proceeded honestly with most errors bordering on claiming too little rather than too much; yet, in their own communities, many Mormons articulated the concern in their oral history interviews that their neighbors or people they knew had taken advantage of the reimbursement process. These oral history interviews demonstrate the pervasive nature of this allegation, with people hearing rumors about fraudulent claims, but not personally knowing of anyone abusing the system. While Peterson expressed his opinion that there were a few “outlandish claims,” most of the concern about these exaggerated losses was pure supposition.<sup>160</sup> Rumors of this nature revealed that many in these eastern Idaho LDS communities feared that their neighbors might suppose they had relied too much on the government or had not been completely honest. Mormons had more latitude in their approach to their claims according to the First Presidency letter mentioned earlier, but many members agonized about what they could justifiably claim and what would mean too much reliance on money from the government. Many also critically judged their neighbors’ claims by this standard.

The Teton Dam failure provided the LDS Church with its first major opportunity

---

<sup>159</sup> Keith Peterson interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 60-61, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>160</sup> Keith Peterson interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 60-61, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

to test the emergency response aspect of its welfare program and justify its adherence to a doctrine of self-reliance. Those inside and outside the church deemed the Mormon welfare response a triumph. Church leadership and many members found less success in navigating the offerings of other agencies sent to assist in the recovery effort. The entrenched doctrine of self-sufficiency and the widespread wariness of the government perpetuated by leaders to the general membership in eastern Idaho prevented Mormon flood victims from fully utilizing assistance from government agencies. In some cases, such as the Red Cross, this adherence to self-sufficiency caused friction between church leaders and leaders of other organizations. On the surface, it looked as though the church had moved forward in an effort to work amicably with government agencies according to the vantage point of many church leaders. Looking at oral histories from both church leaders and government officials demonstrates that church members actually maintained their abhorrence of outside welfare efforts while the government and Red Cross altered their approaches to promote a positive working relationship.

## CHAPTER 6: BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN PRIESTHOOD AND CIVIL LEADERSHIP

The leadership hierarchy of the LDS Church greatly influenced the recovery process in eastern Idaho following the collapse of the Teton Dam. The church relies on stake presidents and bishops or branch presidents for local leadership. The men ordained to these positions have received no previous formal religious training and do not receive financial compensation for their time or service. A bishop and his two counselors, comprising a bishopric, oversee a congregation, referred to as a ward, that encompasses around three to six hundred people.<sup>161</sup> A stake, presided over by a stake president and his two counselors, composed of five to twelve wards and is the intermediate unit of organization between a ward and church headquarters.<sup>162</sup> Bishops and stake presidents derive their authority from the Mormon priesthood, “the power and authority by which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is organized and directed.”<sup>163</sup> The term priesthood has several meanings in Mormonism, but in this analysis, it will denote the local, male leadership of the church. The priesthood leaders in eastern Idaho performed several tasks to streamline the recovery process such as communicating between local members and church headquarters, mediating the relationship between members and

---

<sup>161</sup> Douglas D. Alder, “Ward,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1541-1543.

<sup>162</sup> Stan L. Albrecht, “Stake,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1411-1414.

<sup>163</sup> Richard G. Ellsworth and Melvin J. Luthy, “Priesthood,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1134.



government agencies, and keeping both church and outside groups organized and focused on the recovery of the community. The role the priesthood played in several circumstances following the disaster showed a desire to accommodate the government agencies, but not at the price of losing primary access to church members and relinquishing the independence of the overall church organization. The priesthood served to maintain the close connection between local members and church headquarters. It interceded, as much as possible, in interactions between members and outside agencies. This relationship between members and priesthood leaders was another protective buffer of the church's overall independence.

The priesthood leaders in eastern Idaho quickly went into action to fulfill their perceived immediate duty of ensuring that their neighbors had safely evacuated and that they had notified church headquarters in Salt Lake of the disaster. President Sonderegger of the Rexburg North Stake placed a call to the office overseeing the welfare system of the church and called several times on June 5 to keep church headquarters updated on the growing disaster.<sup>164</sup> The night of the dam collapse, several stake presidents met with bishops, their counselors, and other priesthood holders in wards to work on locating any individuals or families who were missing. In this meeting the stake presidents announced that they would follow the priesthood line of authority, meaning that if a bishop could not be accounted for, the next priesthood holder in line would assume the bishop's responsibilities. Using this chain of command, they could quickly locate any victims that remained unaccounted for and ensure that everyone within a ward had a place to stay for

---

<sup>164</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce D. Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, page 42-44. MSSI 2, BYUISC.

the night.<sup>165</sup>

On Sunday night, June 6, the church leaders in the area prepared to organize the recovery effort that would allow them to rebuild their homes and towns.<sup>166</sup> The county commissioners (also members of the LDS Church) met with local stake presidents to confirm that they would use the organization of the church to coordinate other local, state, and federal programs once they arrived in Rexburg. On Monday morning, the county commissioners held their first meeting in the Army Reserve building. These meetings continued at the same time every day for several months until they tapered off to a weekly and then monthly occurrence. Representatives from various government agencies attended the meetings alongside local church leaders to determine what needed to be done and which organization was the best equipped to handle it.<sup>167</sup>

The county commissioners agreed that any programs relating specifically to the people involved in the flood should first go through the stake presidents. This division of labor allowed the county commissioners to focus solely on repairing public facilities while the church would assume responsibility for the people in the flood zone.<sup>168</sup> Dell Klingler, a county commissioner and member of the church, asserted that “if we as commissioners would have had to set up the kind of organization that we had organized in the Church, it would have taken months, and that would have been by far our biggest

---

<sup>165</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce D. Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, page 42-41, 45. MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>166</sup> Keith L Peterson, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 52, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>167</sup> Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 11-13, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>168</sup> Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 7, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

effort.”<sup>169</sup> Klingler’s remark proved true; the priesthood organization streamlined the recovery process for the victims by increasing the efficiency of the other involved organizations. This initial decision by the county commissioners to rely so heavily on the LDS Church, made before any government agencies arrived in eastern Idaho, also demonstrated a desire to maintain the preexisting hierarchy. The stake presidents and bishops would mediate most contact between the primarily Mormon flood victims and the government programs sent to the area.

The federal government agencies attended their first correlation meeting on Thursday June 8, in Idaho Falls. Mark G. Ricks, a local rancher and president of the Rexburg Stake, attended on behalf of the church, where he met with representatives from the Federal Disaster Assistance Agency (FDAA), HUD, and the SBA. The county commissioners represented the local government at the meeting with Civil Defense representing the State of Idaho.<sup>170</sup>

Ricks waited and listened to what the government representatives had to say and then informed them that using the organization of the LDS Church would expedite their efforts on this particular disaster. He also notified them that they had already initiated recovery efforts and counseled the flood victims not to hesitate in beginning the cleanup and repair process. Ricks described concisely how the welfare system of the church functioned and explained, “the Church was organized and ready to reach people.” Ricks recalled how many of the government representatives approached him after the meeting

---

<sup>169</sup> T. Bardell Klingler, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 154, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>170</sup> Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 16, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

and expressed their interest and approval of utilizing the church organization to direct the recovery efforts.<sup>171</sup>

The priesthood organization of the LDS Church essentially took on the traditional role of the FDAA in coordinating the other federal programs. Hugh Fowler, a representative of the FDAA explained this unique arrangement to Bruce Blumell in an interview following the disaster. Blumell asked if Fowler knew of any problems between the FDAA and the church's ecclesiastical structure, and Fowler replied:

We've utilized them (local stake presidents) and gone to them quite heavily. I've asked them if there were people living out in their wards or their stakes who are non-LDS, and I've been assured that they were treated—and I'm sure this is true—just the same as everybody else. I have no misgivings or anything. I am just very, very grateful for the way they've handled it.<sup>172</sup>

Additional evidence to support Fowler's assessment is difficult to find, but it demonstrates that both Fowler and Blumell wanted this positive evaluation of the local priesthood's work during the recovery period to be true.

To maintain their own organization, the local stake presidents who worked with government agencies also held daily meetings with the bishops in their stakes. These stake presidents advised their bishops to hold daily meetings with the members of their respective wards. The purpose of these meetings, according to President Sonderegger, was to keep people informed and to dispel rumors. The bishops assured their congregations that they could trust the accuracy of the information they provided, and if they inadvertently gave false information, they would attempt to correct it

---

<sup>171</sup> Mark G. Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 11-17, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>172</sup> Hugh Fowler, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 74, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

immediately.<sup>173</sup> Sonderegger believed that these meetings and the availability of information despite a total breakdown in normal channels of communication helped prevent widespread panic, psychological problems, or depression among the victims.<sup>174</sup>

President Ricks recalled how he thought these correlation meetings assisted the government agencies in effectively meeting the needs of the victims. Referring to the SBA, Ricks explained a typical conversation at one of the meetings: “Tell us what your program is. We don’t know anything about it. We need to know so that we can pass the information on to our people.”<sup>175</sup> After the meeting, local priesthood leaders would disseminate the details to their ward members. This method prevented inaccurate information from spreading and gave flood victims a clear idea of the different avenues of aid available from the federal government. It also reinforced the dependence of members on their local priesthood leaders rather than government agencies.

HUD relied a great deal on the priesthood to address the housing issues in the Rexburg area. Carlos Renteria described the problems that HUD faced in eastern Idaho, particularly the inability to effectively communicate with the victims because the flood had damaged the phone lines. By asking a bishop, HUD could easily find an individual or notify them through the bishop that they needed to communicate with them. Bishops, in many cases, had already compiled lists of people in their ward boundaries describing the level of damage to their property, which greatly increased the efficiency of HUD’s

---

<sup>173</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 48, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>174</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, April 1, 1977 box 2, vol. 3, page 89, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>175</sup> Mark Ricks, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 18, 1977 box 2, vol. 3, page 18, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

operations in eastern Idaho.<sup>176</sup> When HUD struggled to meet the needs of flood victims in Sugar City, they used the local bishop as a liaison and actually allowed him to make temporary housing assignments. The bishop assured Renteria that he would work with all the victims in the area and not just those who belonged to the LDS Church.<sup>177</sup>

Using the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the church proved beneficial, but came with unusual requests. The church did not intend to do any work on Sundays and asked the other agencies to respect and comply with this custom. Many government agencies completely shut down non-essential operations on Sunday to comply with this request. Local church leaders and LDS welfare representative Richard Barth also informed the agency issuing food stamps and the Red Cross that members would not avail themselves of these “handouts.” While many people did take advantage of these programs, both groups left the area on June 20 due to dwindling need by the victims.<sup>178</sup>

Even with the distinctive requests of the LDS Church and its membership, the emergency phase of the recovery effort exceeded expectations from many agencies. HUD believed that by using the organizational system of the church it finished its initial housing evaluation six weeks sooner than in all previous disasters at which they had worked. Other government agencies, according to Barth, also found that they could easily exceed how many people they processed in a six-day workweek rather than their

---

<sup>176</sup> Carlos Renteria, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976 box 2, vol. 2, page 85, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>177</sup> Carlos Renteria, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976 box 2, vol. 2, page 88, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>178</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box2, vol. 2, pages 39-41, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

usual seven-day schedule.<sup>179</sup> By using a preexisting system with people who already trusted and knew each other, rather than leadership from outside the disaster area who do not understand the distinctive nature of this particular community, agencies could work more efficiently. Using local church leaders and volunteers also assisted these outside agencies in their responsibilities.

The FDAA's allowance of and the local priesthood's insistence on coordinating and dictating the terms of the relief effort following the collapse of the dam obviously made the entire recovery process more efficient. Nevertheless, any type of compromise between the LDS Church and the government agencies appears to arise from the federal government rather than the church. The LDS members directly affected by the flood soon moved on from a deep-seated undercurrent of state and federal government mistrust, to an appreciation of the employees of various government agencies that assisted them through the emergency phase of the disaster. Henry B. Eyring observed that the Mormon conception of the "dirty government and [...] the government and bureaucracy that have to be watched" evolved because of the close contact between government agencies and Mormons in the Rexburg area. Eyring asserted that he had "never seen as many sensitive, competent, honest executives of business—as I've seen in HUD, and SBA, and the Bureau of Reclamation in this whole situation. And the state people."<sup>180</sup>

President Keith Peterson agreed with Eyring's assessment that state and federal government agencies treated the church and its members respectfully. Peterson believed

---

<sup>179</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 39, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>180</sup> Henry B. Eyring, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 213, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

that only a few minor incidents of misunderstanding occurred between the church and the government, but they did not affect the overall sense of cooperation for the duration of the disaster response. Feeling so strongly about the future attitude of church members toward the government, Peterson shared his opinion: “You know, in the Church there are a number of people who are consistently trying to teach us that the government’s bad and that we shouldn’t participate with them and so on. And I think that’s a disservice to our people.” He argued in favor of greater cooperation and asserted that “the government is set up to serve our needs, we shouldn’t fear it or deprecate it. I think we need to use it.”<sup>181</sup> Peterson’s comment reveals the role the LDS Church occasionally played as a barrier between its members and the government agencies. While the federal government seemed to readily accommodate the unique situation presented by a large concentration of Mormons, the church seemed reluctant to relinquish its influence on its members or easily forget its long-standing tension with the federal government.

Relations between the government and the church seemed to remain helpful and positive, but the church experienced some friction in its relationship with the Red Cross. The church welfare system eagerly tried to meet every need of those affected by the flood, but the welfare products and services provided and the benefits of the organizational system came with certain requirements. Richard Barth personally made it clear Sunday night following the dam failure that the church would organize the relief effort. He told a Red Cross representative from Oregon that the Red Cross would not perform its usual duties as the first organization on the scene with the power to make decisions regarding how the recovery effort would proceed. Barth remarked in his oral

---

<sup>181</sup> Keith L Peterson, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 52-53, MSS1 2, BYUISC.



history interview with Bruce Blumell that this Red Cross representative was upset, “because he’d never run into an organization like the Church before. He just could not comprehend what could be done. I guess he just assumed it would be chaos.”<sup>182</sup>

Eventually the relationship between the church and the Red Cross became amicable and ran more smoothly after their initial encounter.

The biggest issue that arose between the church and the Red Cross had stemmed from a lack of communication between the two agencies and between the church and its members. Both organizations later agreed that an increased level of understanding would salvage the relationship for upcoming disaster responses. Cory Tanner, the Red Cross representative during the recovery period, discussed the efforts of the national organization of the Red Cross and church headquarters to formalize their relationship with the church and address any communication problems that arose during the Teton Dam disaster. Like President Peterson, Tanner acknowledged that the church welfare system had a lot to offer in terms of emergency relief situations and a formalized agreement would increase their ability to cooperate in the future.<sup>183</sup>

Local priesthood leaders made several recommendations about how the priesthood organization functioned on a local level. Most of the responsibility and work resulting from the disaster response fell on the local stake presidents and bishops. Under this level, the high priest group and elder’s quorum in each ward should have received assignments from their bishops to assist him with his duties. Below the quorum level, the

---

<sup>182</sup> Richard Barth, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, November 2, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 40, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>183</sup> S. Corry Tanner, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 30, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 165, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

most basic priesthood assignment in the church is the home teaching responsibility, where leaders assign a priesthood holder several families in his ward to visit each month and assist in any type of emergency. The home teaching network provides the most direct communication between ward members and the church.<sup>184</sup> President Peterson and other local leaders argued that in the Teton Dam disaster the basic priesthood organizations initially failed to support the bishop or stake president in his duties. Peterson emphasized, “If a man has a priesthood stewardship and a priesthood responsibility, he can’t get too busy with his own affairs. He’s got to function [...] we had a lot of priesthood leaders who got so concerned with their own affairs that they didn’t function very well.”<sup>185</sup> When quorums and priesthood holders in wards failed to prioritize the welfare of the group over their individual needs, Peterson asserted that these men had neglected church teachings regarding priesthood stewardships. Peterson’s comment demonstrated, that despite an initial breakdown in the hierarchy he still adhered to the church principle and practice of placing the welfare of the group over that of the individual.

President Mark Ricks recalled that the bishops in the area became so burdened by the day-to-day problems in their wards that their own homes and properties became neglected. The wives and families of these bishops expressed dismay because the bishop had to spend all of his time with ward members and had no time for them. Ricks contended that the bishops needed to delegate more to the quorums in their wards. They,

---

<sup>184</sup> Henry B. Eyring interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 214, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>185</sup> Keith Peterson interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 27, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

in turn, needed to fulfill their assignments, which would have spread the responsibilities out, allowing everyone in the ward to have some time to address their personal obligations. A lack of communication and no prior precedent for a disaster of this nature within the church, Ricks believed, contributed to less mobilization by lower priesthood positions.<sup>186</sup> In a later interview with Blumell, Ricks stated that the lower echelons of the priesthood started functioning according to standard church protocol at the end of July, when most of the chaos had subsided.<sup>187</sup>

The Relief Society, a women's organization within the church that emphasizes service, became somewhat neglected by local priesthood leaders in the area. General Relief Society President Barbara Smith reported to Bruce Blumell several volunteer projects that the Relief Society initiated in the Rexburg area. Local Relief Societies arranged to feed people several meals a day from chapel kitchens. They also started a nursery program where several women would watch children during the day at Ricks College while their parents worked to clean up their homes.<sup>188</sup> Despite the amount of work they did in the community to address the needs of the victims, local priesthood leaders failed to include Relief Society presidents in daily meetings. Local Relief Societies also did not have clear expectations regarding what their role during the disaster should be. Blumell, in his article "The LDS Response to the Teton Dam Disaster in Idaho," attributed this disregard for the Relief Societies in the area to the aforementioned

---

<sup>186</sup> Mark Ricks interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, pages 20-21, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>187</sup> Mark Ricks interviewed by Bruce Blumell, March 31, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 30, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>188</sup> Barbara B. Smith interviewed by Bruce Blumell, April 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, pages 141-142, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

problems with communication. Despite little direction from their priesthood leaders, most Relief Societies organized themselves to tackle any disaster-related issues within their ward boundaries.<sup>189</sup> While the Relief Society organization does not necessarily need direction from the priesthood, it does need some of its actions sanctioned by an overseeing priesthood leader. Although the local Relief Societies did not get the opportunity to attend the correlation meetings, they provided many types of service to aid flood victims in the summer of 1976.

The local priesthood leaders functioned remarkably well considering the catastrophic level of damage inflicted by the Teton Dam failure. Those with official leadership positions such as bishops or stake presidents carried out their duties as proscribed by their respective office. Priesthood holders in the levels of responsibility below a bishop struggled to fulfill their obligations with the same attention as the bishops or stake presidents due to a lack of communication within the ward or stake or the severity of their own situation following the flood. Most local priesthood leaders also neglected to fully utilize the Relief Society, and excluded female members of the LDS Church in leadership positions from actively participating in the decision-making process of the recovery effort.

In spite of the shortcomings many church leaders perceived in their own response to the disaster, some, like Henry B. Eyring, saw the larger situation as “a great moment in Church History.” He gave “high marks” to Presidents Ricks, Peterson, and Sonderegger and other leaders for quickly adapting to the situation and to the people of the Upper

---

<sup>189</sup> Blumell, 40.

Snake River Valley for their heroism.<sup>190</sup> The new disaster manual produced by the church following the flood had input from the Relief Society and all the priesthood quorums involved and addressed LDS disaster response on a personal, ward, stake, and church-wide level.<sup>191</sup> Because of their efficiency, Eyring believed that government agencies would emulate some of the church methods of disaster response and rely more on the church in the future. Eyring believed that from this experience, the next time an agency responded anywhere around the country they would say, “Where are the Mormons?”<sup>192</sup>

Many of the local leaders, according to oral history accounts, saw the perception of the church by government organizations and outside agencies change during their interactions throughout the summer months of 1976. Eyring recalled an experience where the *Idaho Statesman* in Boise had raised fifty thousand dollars for the disaster victims, and rather than give it to the Red Cross to distribute, they chose Eyring and Ricks College to select people to receive the *Statesman* money. Eyring considered the circumstance of a “historically anti-Mormon newspaper” trusting an LDS college to be a sign that the Teton Dam failure successfully improved the relationship between Mormons, state and federal government agencies, and other secular organizations.<sup>193</sup> The church looked to its welfare program to encourage a positive opinion of its practices and

---

<sup>190</sup> Henry B. Eyring interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 205, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>191</sup> Barbara B. Smith interviewed by Bruce Blumell, April 18, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 153, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>192</sup> Henry B. Eyring interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 212, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>193</sup> Henry B. Eyring interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 207, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

teachings and secured this praise for their work with the Teton Dam. They also received positive feedback from the government representatives sent to eastern Idaho for their organizational structure led by local priesthood leaders.

The reaction by priesthood leaders to laudatory press and comments they thought the church received for their efforts during the disaster recovery showed an attempt by the church to actively seek greater acceptance in the U.S. of their unique way of doing things. The church focused on improving relations with other agencies as well as government organizations to promote the idea of a new, more cooperative LDS Church. While they believed themselves successful in securing a better image for the church, they also managed to maintain their unique principles and practices. Local priesthood leaders monopolized the avenues of communication between government agencies and the flood victims. The cooperation and compromise came mostly from the government agencies and organizations outside the church who allowed the priesthood leaders to coordinate their efforts and dictate to their wards and stakes what types of government or Red Cross assistance would be acceptable to receive. Any outside acceptance of Mormon welfare and organizational systems came without altering their methods or beliefs. Most of the accommodation arose from the government agencies or Red Cross who found themselves in the minority for the duration of this disaster.

## CHAPTER 7: ORGANIZING AN ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS

In addition to coordinating with government agencies, local priesthood leaders also organized their own volunteer effort to assist homeowners in the flood zone to clean the mud and debris from their homes and properties. The ability of the victims to quickly repair and restore their homes resulted from thousands of volunteers from Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, and Canada who worked in various capacities to restore the flood-ravaged homes in the Upper Snake River Valley. The stake presidents in the area took control of the volunteer labor to maximize the work done, ensuring that electricians and other skilled workers were sent to the correct areas, the proper amount of workers were assigned to a home, and that the necessary tools and equipment were available. The organization of volunteer labor by local priesthood leaders demonstrated the communal spirit typical of the early LDS Church, and the church used this effort to generate a better image of the church.

With supplies and money flooding into the disaster zone, only the copious amounts of mud and debris hindered the recovery process. Janet Hibbert of Sugar City recalled the daunting task she and her husband Larry had before them with mud reaching the bottom of their basement windows, approximately four feet deep. Hibbert expressed despair as she viewed the task in front of her, “It seemed impossible, and I surely felt like an ant with such a big undertaking ahead of me.” Soon after the flood, a group of teenagers came to her home with “fishing waders, buckets, shovels, and gloves” and

assisted the Hibberts in removing the mud from their basement.<sup>194</sup> If homes had survived the flood and remained mostly intact on their foundations, mud and all manner of debris filled their structures. Any type of recovery endeavor had to address the need for a substantial volunteer effort to eradicate the mud, garbage, and wreckage from people's homes, farms, and businesses.

President Sonderegger suggested to other stake presidents in the affected region that stake presidents who escaped the flood each take one of the wards in the disaster areas and assist with the recovery effort until completed. President Sonderegger trusted his idea was the result of divine inspiration; an answer to his earnest prayers for help. The church lacked a precedent for this type of assistance, causing some initial disagreement between the priesthood leaders in the Rexburg area and those stake presidents or bishops outside the area regarding how to organize such an effort.<sup>195</sup> The outside stakes originally contributed welfare items to the wards and stakes church headquarters had assigned them to help. After they had taken care of the initial needs of the ward, President Harold Hillam of the Idaho Falls South Stake, began organizing crews of volunteer laborers to go into Rexburg, Sugar City, and other damaged cities to start digging out the mud and debris about a week after the flood.<sup>196</sup> In a correlation meeting with the stake presidents, General Brooks of Civil Defense agreed that they needed hundreds of man-hours just for the clean-up process (a bishop in Sugar City estimated that an average house in his ward required around four hundred hours to merely

---

<sup>194</sup> Thomas et al., 42.

<sup>195</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, pages 49-50, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>196</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 10, MSS1 2, BYUISC.



remove the mud and clean the house).<sup>197</sup> For a week, President Hillam had around three thousand volunteers a day arriving in buses from surrounding areas in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming to put in a full day's work. On Saturday June 19, they had five thousand volunteers, their biggest volunteer day during the recovery period of the disaster.<sup>198</sup>

Stake presidents within Rexburg decided on a daily basis how many volunteers their stake needed and let President Hillam know. He then assigned stakes outside the area to bring a certain number of volunteers or equipment and report to their location the next day. In many cases, these stakes sent more laborers or machinery than President Hillam requested. He had called several regional priesthood representatives (who oversee several stakes in one region) to request front-end loaders, asking for five or six. The regional representative in Soda Springs returned his call letting Hillam know that they had located one hundred and fifty. The volunteers coming to the area also donated more than just their work, according to Hillam. He explained to Blumell in an interview how humbled the busloads of volunteers made him feel who "had been up since 3:30 and 4:00 a.m. to make that trip and come and spend a hard day's work, furnishing their own lunch, paying for their own transportation, and then getting back on the bus tired and dirty and heading back home."<sup>199</sup>

After the June 19 volunteer day, the clean-up efforts progressed rapidly, necessitating specialized volunteers to help people make their homes livable. Working with another stake president, President Yost, Hillam started bringing in electricians to

---

<sup>197</sup> Blumell, 38.

<sup>198</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 13-14, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>199</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 14-17, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

restore power to individual homes. Hillam wanted around one hundred and fifty electricians and Yost sent him between four and five hundred. Hillam instructed local bishops to reimburse the electricians from their fast offering fund for any supplies they used. Most of the electricians decided to forego the reimbursement, donating their time, trucks, and supplies. This service alone saved many homeowners hundreds of dollars, and a city electrical inspector stated that without this particular volunteer effort most homes would have waited for months to have electricity restored.<sup>200</sup>

The bulk of the outside volunteer labor lasted around two weeks with people from Idaho Falls donating around three hundred thousand man-hours during this period and 28,000 volunteers pouring in from surrounding areas, not including Idaho Falls.<sup>201</sup> Hugh Fowler, the deputy regional director of the FDAA, complimented the church and its members throughout an oral history interview with Bruce Blumell. He maintained that he had exceptional cooperation and patience from the people involved when compared to other disasters he had encountered. Fowler also showed gratitude for the volunteer program organized by the Church and expressed that, “it speeded things up immensely.”<sup>202</sup>

While the FDAA and others were very complimentary toward the volunteer efforts, many of the local church leaders, who were also grateful for outside help, argued that they could have improved on the organizational aspects of their effort. President

---

<sup>200</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 18-19, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>201</sup> “Cleanup Runs Smoothly under Church Leadership,” *Church News*, (June 26, 1976), 12.

<sup>202</sup> Hugh Fowler interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, pages 73-77, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

Sonderegger believed that the organizational system he initiated began to break down, with too many volunteers and a lack of clear communication between the disaster area and outside stakes assigned to help. Sonderegger stated that his original system of one “helper” stake for each stake in the flood zone would have kept the system more organized, but many other people believed that Rexburg needed an enormous amount of volunteers from the region to deal with the great destruction in the area.<sup>203</sup> Too many volunteers may sound like an enviable problem in a disaster situation, but President Hillam explained that the biggest concern with this specific issue was guaranteeing that he did not waste the volunteers’ time due to poor organization.<sup>204</sup>

A monetary value cannot be assigned to the service that the outside volunteers rendered in Rexburg, with Mormons and non-Mormons alike having their homes cleaned out in a matter of weeks rather than months. Church members and leaders believed that the volunteer work also benefited the image of the church in general and became another tool for proselytizing and promoting good will toward church doctrine. President Hillam judged that the volunteer effort put the LDS Church in a positive light. Many of the volunteers not only brought their own lunches but a lunch for the people at whose home they worked, and Hillam concluded this small act created a bond between many people. He also recounted a story of volunteers from Pocatello who came to assist a man cleaning out his home. The man told the volunteer that he was not a member of the church, and one of the volunteers replied that it did not matter, they just wanted to help him. Hillam

---

<sup>203</sup> Ferron W. Sonderegger interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 6, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, pages 55-57, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>204</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 14, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

described the volunteers “[looking] out on the porch there he was sitting in tears to think the people would think that much to come and help him when he wasn’t a member of the church.”<sup>205</sup>

Early in August, the volunteer efforts ended when more concrete information about an impending monetary settlement from the government became available. The church decided it could no longer accept free labor from volunteers if the government agreed to make a full financial restitution to the victims.<sup>206</sup> The organization of the volunteer cleanup by the priesthood leadership in the area had served several purposes, primarily giving flood victims a beneficial advantage in the recovery process. Kent Marlor, the civil defense operations director in the area, claimed, “We are 400 percent ahead of schedule” due to the volunteer effort.<sup>207</sup> The LDS Church also claimed to benefit from this massive organizational undertaking. One of their stated goals for their welfare program was to garner positive attention for their service and values by those outside the church. The Teton Dam disaster provided an opportunity to display their efficient organizational system and comprehensive disaster response efforts to non-members.

In an interview with Bruce Blumell, HUD representative Carlos Renteria commented on the volunteer effort sponsored by the church and praised their

---

<sup>205</sup> Howard G. Hillam interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 20, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>206</sup> Ferron Sonderegger interviewed by Bruce Blumell on April 1, 1977, box 2, vol. 3, page 74, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>207</sup> “Some 5,000 volunteers help clean up debris,” *The Post-Register*, June 21, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

organizational system and desire to “help fellow humans.”<sup>208</sup> Renteria’s interview with Blumell reveals that he left Idaho with an overall positive impression of the LDS Church’s approach to the disaster from the welfare system, priesthood organization, and volunteer work. Hugh Fowler also made several appreciative remarks about working with the stake presidents in the area and stressed that he relied on them “quite heavily.”<sup>209</sup> Fowler, Renteria, and other disaster response workers noted the unique behavior of the LDS disaster victims who exhibited more patience and altruism than these individuals typically encountered in a disaster situation. They respected the local priesthood leaders and the level of organization that was already in place in the flood zone, which contributed to a quicker and more efficient recovery effort.

Dell Klingler, a counselor in a stake presidency and Madison County Commissioner, expressed the belief of many in the church that the welfare program and priesthood organization had positively influenced non-members from government agencies and other disaster response organizations. He claimed in his interview with Blumell, “these federal people are really amazed at the way the Church has organized, and amazed at the spirit of the people.”<sup>210</sup> Klingler also claimed that reporters from all over the U.S. had visited the area and been impressed with how local leaders had handled

---

<sup>208</sup> Carlos Renteria interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 93, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>209</sup> Hugh Fowler interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 7, 1976, box 2, vol. 2, page 74, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>210</sup> Dell Klingler, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 160, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

this particular disaster.<sup>211</sup> His interview with Blumell demonstrated that both he and Blumell wanted it noted that those outside the church had praised and validated the work of the church welfare system and local priesthood leaders. The actual articles referenced by Klingler, particularly one printed in *Time*, does not actually mention the LDS Church, yet Klingler and others maintained that they had the approving eyes of the nation upon them.<sup>212</sup>

This perceived success by the church with its massive volunteer clean up, priesthood leadership, and welfare products also convinced many priesthood leaders that members and leaders within the church could have improved on this success. Stake President Harold Hillam of Idaho Falls had been selected to coordinate the volunteer efforts, with President Kimball eventually making it an official calling within the church. Hillam, so confident of the work the church performed during this disaster, argued that the church could perform the work that HUD or the Red Cross typically do in a future emergency response situation. Hillam stated, “I am totally convinced that the Church can do whatever it wants, because of the great faith of the Saints.” Hillam maintained that while the Red Cross “did a great service. I think some of their services paralleled the welfare services of the Church.” He then reaffirmed the church’s desire to remain independent, arguing “We maybe would have been better off if we would have taken care

---

<sup>211</sup> Dell Klingler, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 5, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 159, MSSI 2, BYUISC.

<sup>212</sup> “Environment: Teton: Eyewitness to Disaster,” *Time*, (June, 21, 1976), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,918216,00.html> (accessed on August 15, 2011).

of our own a little more with our welfare services.”<sup>213</sup> While the stated purpose of the LDS Church’s welfare system and priesthood organization was to promote charity based on religious principles and positive exposure to non-members, many involved in the Teton Dam disaster also saw it as an opportunity to see whether the church could adequately respond to a disaster situation without having to rely too heavily on the federal government or other organizations.

President Hiram believed that the volunteer effort in eastern Idaho showed that the church had willing priesthood members who had a variety of practical skills. With these assets, he believed the church could and should function independently of other organizations, particularly the government. Many saw the Teton Dam recovery response by the church as a preparatory effort to increase the independence of the church. The desire of the LDS Church to use its welfare system and priesthood organization to improve its image demonstrated a larger aspiration to achieve greater assimilation within American society. Yet, these same LDS Church programs also served to maintain the independence and self-sufficiency of the church from American society and government.

---

<sup>213</sup> Harold Hiram, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, July 4, 1976, box 2, vol. 1, page 21, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles Ezra Taft Benson toured the flood-damaged areas of eastern Idaho on June 15, 1976. *The Post-Register* of Idaho Falls recorded his impressions as he met with flood victims and viewed the destruction. Speaking of the church's welfare program and priesthood leadership, he observed that the way it functioned in this situation "was an inspiration to me. I come away a better man. It is pure religion in action. The Lord's program is in full operation."<sup>214</sup> Benson expressed his approval of the way local leaders handled things in eastern Idaho. "The church is organized to help. The Lord expects the church to be a 'light unto the world.' Sometimes we have to have tragedy to rise and shine."<sup>215</sup> For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the collapse of the Teton Dam provided an opportunity to demonstrate a new level of cooperation with the federal government and assimilation within American society. While the exposure they believed they received for the amount of work and resources they dedicated to help the people of eastern Idaho recover was positive, most failed to note that the church had not truly changed its behavior. The LDS leadership from the president of the church, Spencer W. Kimball, down to local bishops in the area maintained a wariness toward outside welfare and assistance, continued to

---

<sup>214</sup> "Twelve apostles leader...Benson visits flood area," *The Post-Register*, June, 16, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>215</sup> "Twelve apostles leader...Benson visits flood area," *The Post-Register*, June, 16, 1976, box 1, folder 8, MSS1 2, BYUISC.



foster tightly-knit community ties, and relied heavily on the hierarchy of the priesthood to organize much of the response and recovery efforts. The church and government agencies worked well together, but this success is attributed to the accommodation of Mormon principles and practices by the other relief agencies. The church had changed in its desire for a positive perception by the government and American society only. Its beliefs and practices remained intact from their nineteenth century roots.

Despite the catastrophic destruction of property caused by the Bureau of Reclamation's critical miscalculations, most eastern Idaho Mormons did not lose their faith in dams or other western water projects. An article in the January 7, 1977 edition of the Idaho Falls Post-Register claimed that many people supported the rebuilding of the Teton Dam, including Reisner's "crotchety Mormon farmer" Willis Walker.<sup>216</sup> Walker claimed, "We need that water, but if they build it next time, they should be sure they know what they are doing."<sup>217</sup> Even residents who did not support the rebuilding of the dam did not report complaints against the Bureau or express concern over pushing the environmental limits of the Upper Snake River Valley.<sup>218</sup> The Mormon attitude toward the government, particularly the Bureau of Reclamation, remained similar to their pre-1976 stance. LDS residents continued to support the investment of federal money in large water projects as a way to facilitate their way of life in the arid West. They

---

<sup>216</sup> Reisner, 385.

<sup>217</sup> "Rebuilding of the Teton Dam favored by many, others still in doubt." *The Post-Register*, January 7, 1977, box 1, folder 3, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

<sup>218</sup> "Most residents don't want the Teton Dam rebuilt now." Box 1, folder 4, MSS1 2, BYUISC.

remained “dam Mormons,” wary of government welfare unless it supported the Mormon community.

The environment proved to be another force that could not change the behavior of the LDS Church, following attempts by the federal government and mainstream American culture. Despite rampaging floodwaters and months of disarray in eastern Idaho, the Mormon population clung to its historic principles of independence from outside organizations, heavy involvement by priesthood leaders in member’s lives, and the promotion of community welfare above the needs of the individual. The preexisting organization provided by the priesthood, the massive volunteer effort, and the welfare system of the church sped up the recovery process considerably and contributed to a positive relationship between members and outside organizations. While HUD, FDAA, SBA, and the Red Cross had to adapt their usual approach to accommodate a large Mormon population, members and leaders of the LDS Church learned to respect and trust agencies outside of their church community.

The church achieved its stated goal of becoming a “light unto the world” through their welfare services employed during the Teton Dam disaster. Thomas S. Monson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles since 1963 and, at the time of writing, serving as the president of the LDS Church, participated in several national forums on welfare and disaster response including President Ronald Reagan’s Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives. In the course of this service, Monson frequently used the church’s work during the Teton Dam recovery effort to illustrate the LDS approach to welfare services and disaster response. Monson claimed that President Reagan praised the LDS

welfare system for its emphasis on self-sufficiency.<sup>219</sup>

The LDS response to the Teton Dam collapse convinced some outside the church that the LDS welfare system and priesthood organization could effectively manage a disaster, but it confirmed the faith of many within the church that they could rely on this organization. It convinced members that the principles of self-reliance, submission to priesthood authority, and sacrificing individual needs for the good of the community were still valid principles embraced by their chosen faith. The same principles and beliefs that may have led to their support of the construction of the Teton Dam saw them through the demise of this edifice. Speaking thirty-five years following the collapse of the dam, Henry B. Eyring (now a member of the First Presidency of the church) recalled his experiences in Rexburg in 1976 while serving as the President of Ricks College. Eyring claimed, “what happened in the flooded houses in Idaho is a manifestation of the Lord’s way to help those in great need become self-reliant.”<sup>220</sup> The experiences following the disaster in eastern Idaho became an integral piece in the seventy-six year history of the LDS Church’s Welfare system and validated members’ beliefs that the Mormon approach to addressing their temporal needs and concerns was as God would have it.

---

<sup>219</sup> Thomas S. Monson, “A Provident Plan—A Precious Promise,” *Ensign*, (May, 1986). [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) (accessed August 15, 2011).

<sup>220</sup> Henry B. Eyring, “Opportunities to do Good,” *Ensign*, (May, 2011), 24. [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) (accessed August 15, 2011).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Primary Sources:**

- “Cleanup Runs Smoothly under Church Leadership,” *Church News*, (June 26, 1976), 12.
- Clements, Louis J. *Teton Flood: June 5, 1976 Revisited*. Rexburg, ID: Eastern Idaho Publishing, 1991.
- “Environment: Teton: Eyewitness to Disaster,” *Time*, (June, 21, 1976),  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,918216,00.html> (accessed on August 15, 2011).
- Eyring, Henry B. “Opportunities to do Good,” *Ensign*, (May, 2011), 24. [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) (accessed August 15, 2011).
- Ford, Gerald. “Remarks upon signing the Teton Dam Disaster Bill.” September 7, 1976, The American Presidency Project.  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6308#axzz1bx6ubXjV> (accessed October 26, 2011).
- Independent Panel to Review Cause of Teton Dam Failure. *Report to U.S. Department of the Interior and State of Idaho on Failure of the Teton Dam*, by Wallace L. Chadwick et al. Idaho Falls, ID: The Panel, 1976.
- Monson, Thomas S. “A Provident Plan—A Precious Promise,” *Ensign*, (May, 1986). [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) (accessed August 15, 2011).
- Oath of Intention—Registration: An Act to amend section 501, Revised Statutes of Idaho. January 29, 1889 General Laws of the Territory of Idaho, Passed at the Fifteenth Session, (James A. Pinney, Territorial Printer, 1889), 14-15.  
<http://books.google.com/> (accessed July 26, 2013).
- Thomas, Janet, Bernice McCowin, Mary Tingey, and Margaret Thomas, eds. *That Day in June: Reflections on the Teton Dam Disaster*. Rexburg, ID: Ricks College Press, 1977.
- U.S. Congress. Senate. 1882. Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882. 47<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. Reprinted in *Select Statutes and Other Documents Illustrative of the History of the United States, 1861-1898*, William MacDonal, ed. 1922, 319-323.  
<http://books.google.com> (accessed July 24, 2013).

U.S. Congress. Senate. 1887. Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. 49<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess.  
Reprinted in *Select Statutes and Other Documents Illustrative of the History of the United States, 1861-1898*, William MacDonald, ed. 1922, 380-389.  
<http://books.google.com> (accessed July 24, 2013).

U.S. Department of the Interior. Teton Dam Failure Review Group. April 1977. *Failure of the Teton Dam: A Report of Findings*, by William F. Eikenberry et al. U.S. Government Printing Office, Denver.

Vance, Nola T. *Safe in a Hayfield: Overcoming the Challenges of the Teton Dam Disaster*. Sugar City, ID: Nola T. Vance, 2006.

### Archival Collections:

Kimball, Spencer Wooley Speeches (MS 3628). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Teton Dam Collection (MSSI 2). Brigham Young University-Idaho Special Collections, David O. McKay Library, Brigham Young University-Idaho, Rexburg, Idaho.

### Secondary Sources:

Alm, Leslie R., Ross E. Burkhart, W. David Patton, and James B. Weatherby. "Intrastate Regional Differences in Political Culture: A Case Study of Idaho." *State & Local Government Review* 33, no. 2 (Spring, 2001): 109-119. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 2, 2010).

Arrington, Leonard J. "Crisis in Identity," in *Mormonism and American Culture*, ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972.

---. *Beet Sugar in the West: A History of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1891-1966*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966.

Arrington, Leonard J., and Davis Bitton. *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-Day Saints*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Arrington, Leonard J., Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May. *Building the City of God: Community & Cooperation among the Mormons*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

Blumell, Bruce D. "The LDS Response to the Teton Dam Disaster in Idaho." *Sunstone Magazine*, (March-April, 1980): 40. <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/020-35-42.pdf> (accessed August 29, 2011).

- Boffey, Phillip M. "Teton Dam Collapse: Was it a Predictable Disaster?" *Science* 193, no. 4247 (July, 1976): 30-32. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 2, 2010).
- . "Teton Dam Verdict: A Foul-up by the Engineers." *Science* 195, no. 4275 (Jan., 1977): 270-272. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed February 2, 2010).
- Burton, Allen H. *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*. Garden City, NY: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1969.
- Bushman, Richard Lyman. *Making Space for Mormons*. The Arrington Lecture Series. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997.
- Crowder, David L. *Rexburg, Idaho: The First One Hundred Years, 1883-1993*. Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1983.
- Godfrey, Matthew C. *Religion, Politics, and Sugar: The Mormon Church, the Federal Government, and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1907-1921*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007.
- Gordon, Sarah Barringer. *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Gottlieb, Robert, and Peter Booth Wiley. *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power*. New York, NY: Putnam's, 1984.
- Graham, Wayne J. "The Teton Dam Failure—An Effective Warning and Evacuation." Paper presented at the Association of the State Dam Safety Officials 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference, Indian Wells, California, September 7-11, 2008.
- Gunn, Angus M. *Encyclopedia of Disasters: Environmental Catastrophes and Human Tragedies*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2008.
- Hawks, Rebecca. "Sore Vexation," the Utah Saints and the Gentile War: The Development of the LDS Church During the Civil War. Thesis (M.A.)--Boise State University, 2010, 2010.
- Hill, Marvin S., and James R. Allen ed. *Mormonism in American Culture*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972.
- Ludlow, Daniel H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. New York: Macmillan, 1992.
- Lyman, E. Leo. "A Mormon Transition in Idaho Politics." *Idaho Yesterdays* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 2-11, 24-29.

- McCullough, David. *The Johnstown Flood: The Incredible Story Behind One of the Most Devastating "Natural" Disasters America Has Ever Known*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- McDonald, Dylan J. *Images of America: The Teton Dam Disaster*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006.
- Meinig, D. W. "The Mormon Culture Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847-1964." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55, no. 2 (Jun., 1965): 191-220. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed March 22, 2011).
- Ostling, Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling. *The Power and the Promise: Mormon America*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999.
- Peterson, F. Ross. "Teton Dam Disaster: Tragedy or Triumph?" Lecture presented at the Sixty-Sixth Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities at Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 1982.
- Peterson, Nils M. and Jianguo Liu. "Impacts of Religion on Environmental Worldviews: The Teton Valley Case." *Society and Natural Resources* 71, (2008): 708-714. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed March 22, 2011).
- Pisani, Donald J. "Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century." *Agricultural History* 77, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 391-419. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed March 22, 2011).
- Reisner, Marc. *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Robinson, Michael C. *Water for the West: The Bureau of Reclamation 1902-1977*. Chicago: Public Works Historical Society, 1979.
- Rudd, Glen L. *Pure Religion: The Story of Church Welfare Since 1930*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995.
- Schwantes, Carlos A. *In Mountain Shadows: A History of Idaho*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.
- Steinberg, Ted. *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Thompson, Dennis L. "Religion and the Idaho Constitution." *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Oct., 1967): 169-178. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed August 7, 2013).

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Wells, Merle W. *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1892*, Studies in Mormon History. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978.

---. "Law in the Service of Politics: Anti-Mormonism in Idaho Territory." *Idaho Yesterdays*, 25, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 33-43.

---. "The Idaho Anti-Mormon Test Oath, 1884-1892," *The Pacific Historical Review* XXIV, no 3 (August, 1995).

---. "Origins of Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1880," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Oct., 1956): 107-116. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (accessed July 26, 2013).

Worster, Donald. *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Wright, G. Frederick. "The Mormon Question in Idaho." *The Nation*, no. 1317 (September 25, 1890): 243-244.

### **Websites**

Halpern, Faye et al. *A Guide to Writing in Religious Studies*. The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2007.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center. "Religious Studies," <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/religious-studies/>, (accessed March 6, 2013).