

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### TETON DAM

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Not long before Rexburg and a number of adjacent Teton River communities prepared to celebrate July 4, 1976 in their national bicentennial observances, a disaster unparalleled in Idaho's experience disorganized their riverside areas. On June 5, a newly constructed storage and flood control dam washed out just when its reservoir filled. A less satisfactory form of flood control has not been invented. An enormous surge of water flooded down out of a narrow gorge and rushed out across a broad plain. Many houses and other structures simply were smashed or floated away when a deep wave of water (following a dust storm it stirred up as it advanced) struck more than a hundred miles of channel land on its way toward American Falls reservoir, which contained it hours later. Emergency relief and reconstruction taxed local community resources all summer. Bureau of Reclamation authorities, assisted by Small Business Administration appraisers, arranged to distribute \$200,000,000 in damage coverage, for which U.S.B.R. management assumed responsibility for having undertaken an unsuccessful project.

Although Teton Dam's north side washed entirely away, some of its structure remains as an interesting monument to that disaster. (Rebuilt cities and towns also survive as a tribute to community resilience in that area, where Latter-day Saint leaders managed to restore their cultural as well as structural resources with remarkable skill.) Located several miles north of State Highway 33 between Tetonia and Newdale, remnants of Teton Dam can be seen from a viewpoint that includes an interpretive area. Aside from its local historic significance, this site gained national importance as a base for setting of a program for inspecting and testing dams everywhere in order to avert similar troubles in areas below unsafe reservoir structures. In this case, porous lava reservoir walls and problems with controlling its initial use as a storage facility had a part in that unfortunate operation. A considerable controversy naturally erupted after that unfortunate incident, which still can be visualized by a trip to that unusual scene of catastrophe.

**(This information has not been edited.)**

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