TETON DAM
The Teton Dam was located in Fremont County, Idaho in the Teton River Canyon above Wilford, Sugar City, and Rexburg.

The Teton Dam project was started in 1972. By 1976, it was 90% finished. Workers were finishing the outlet tunnel. It was called an earthen dam because it was built with clay, sand, silt, gravel, and rock. It was not made with concrete. At the bottom of the dam it was 1,690 feet thick. It was 305 feet tall. At the top of the dam, it was 35 feet wide and 3,050 feet long.

On October 3, 1975, the reservoir began to fill. The reservoir was planned to be 17 miles long with a capacity to store nearly 290,000 acre feet of water or 80 billion gallons. There was a lot of snow that winter and by June 1976, the reservoir was nearly full from the spring runoff.

On June 3, 1976, workers found two springs 1,300 and 1,500 feet downstream from the dam. This was not a cause for alarm because some leaking is expected with an earthen dam. The water was clear. Engineers did not realize the water was coming from behind the dam through the ground like shown in the picture below.
On Saturday, June 5th at 7:00 am, workers discovered the first leak on the north side of the actual dam itself. Shortly after, a second leak was noticed about 130 feet below the top of the dam on the north side. At 10:15 am, a wet spot formed on the dam. Around 10:30 am, there was a loud noise and more water began leaking out. Two bulldozers were sent to the front of the dam to try and fill the hole with dirt and rocks.

At 10:43 am, the Fremont County Sheriff was notified that the dam could break. At 10:50 am, the Madison County Sheriff was notified. Both sheriffs contacted the local radio stations. Don Ellis who worked at a Rexburg station decided to drive up to the dam to see what was happening.
Around 11:00 a.m., a whirlpool was spotted in the water above the
dam. By now the hole on the downstream side had grown to more than
25 feet in diameter. One of the bulldozers got stuck. Another moved in to
pull the first out, and both were swallowed by the hole. The operators
were pulled free with ropes that had been tied around their waists.

Ellis got to the dam around 11:30 am. From the visitor’s outlook he
could see there was a hole developing at the base of the dam. Ellis
immediately got on his two-way radio and began to broadcast from his
car.

He told the people, “The dam is slowly beginning to crumble, it
would appear! There is a lot of water coming through and there is going
to be some problems downstream!”

At 11:45 am, there were still workers on the top of the dam trying to
push rocks into the whirlpool to plug it up. Realizing the danger the
workers were in, supervisors began ordering their men to retreat to safety.
As the dam started to collapse, two bulldozers barely drove out of the
way in time. Unable to hear noise of the collapsing dam over the
machinery, the operators cheated death by only a few moments.

Ellis later told what he saw in an interview: “As I was talking,
suddenly the whole downstream face of that north side of the dam
seemed to crumble. A huge gaping hole broke up and water, mud, and
dust just spurted out . . . The volume was suddenly so tremendous and
immediately I knew, everyone standing there knew, a real disaster was in
the making. I began broadcasting that continually from that point on.
‘People downstream, evacuate quickly! Hurry! Hurry!’

On my tape, when I listened back to it, it was simply repetitious of,
‘People downstream, people in the way of these floodwaters, there is
going to be a tremendous flood! The volume of water coming through
will be tremendous! The people downstream should evacuate quickly! The
water is coming!’”

The dam officially broke at 11:57 am.
A half-mile downstream, Norma Reynolds, her son and daughter-in-law, and another couple had decided to go fishing on the Teton River. They floated the river on a big yellow raft catching a few trout. They had started floating down the river a quarter of a mile downstream from the dam. Around 11:30 am, Norma’s husband, Ross, was in St. Anthony getting gas. A customer told him about the radio broadcasts. Ross raced home and frantically called the dam’s office to tell them to warn his family. He grabbed a pistol to get their attention and went searching. He stood on a cliff searching for them. He finally found them a quarter-mile away from him. He fired the gun and waved his arms wildly. There was no response. He fired his gun again. This time he got their attention.

Norma and the others realized something must be wrong. They noticed a log go past and the muddy color of the water. They decided to get out of the canyon. They pulled the raft onto a small meadow. Although the canyon wall was steep, it could be climbed. They pulled the raft behind them and started to climb the canyon walls. After climbing 50 feet, they looked back and took a glance upstream. They saw a wall of approaching mud and water. They quickly let go of the raft and barely finished climbing the canyon wall.

Meanwhile Ross ran down a trail to the river edge to meet his family with the raft. He could not see the raft, but he did hear an odd sound of logs cracking as if in a fire, multiplied a hundredfold, underscored with an ominous series of crashes. Ross raised his eyes from the riverbank to look upstream. He jumped backward, startled by a wall of mud and water, not a quarter-mile distant. Tops of 125 foot cottonwood trees were being snapped as the wall of water came down on them. The wall bore down on the place where Ross had last observed the raft. Hoping it might yet appear, he stayed on and on. When he could wait no longer, he fled to high ground.

Once they were up on high ground, Norma and Ross were able to find each other. They had barely escaped the river’s fury.
Daryl Griggs and David Benson were fishing three miles downstream from the dam. Daryl was able to grab onto a tree and survive. David was swept downstream and drowned.

The water was penned in the Teton River Canyon for six miles. One witness described the canyon as "completely full of angry, churning, devil-sent destruction."

Put a star where we are standing now by the Teton Dam. Look at where the water left the Teton River Canyon. Put another star. We will travel to this area next.

As the water plunged out of the Teton Canyon's mouth, it spread out over Wilford in five fingers. The wave in Wilford varied in size, described in some places as 70 feet high and in others only 10 feet high.

After local radio broadcast word that the dam had failed, Alice Birch's two sons talked her into abandoning the home she had lived in for 50 years. They and her grandson headed for higher ground. "As they drove toward St. Anthony," Wilda Birch of Idaho Falls later wrote, "they could see the water coming like a huge cloud of dust. They estimated it was 20 feet high." Afterward, "Some men who were on the Teton Hill south of the river, reported to the family that when the water hit Alice's house, it lifted it up and over the light wires, and then the house exploded."
Wilford’s two-story church was engulfed by flood waters. The church was completely gutted.

Having surveyed the Wilford area, one official described it not as devastation, but annihilation. With only a few houses left standing and the bridges and roads washed out, many described Wilford as being unrecognizable. Many felt disoriented as they tried to locate their former property.

By 1:00 pm, the water was approaching Sugar City, a town of more than 600. The town’s fire alarm was activated, wailing as a warning to residents. However, no building or home would escape unscathed.
Most residents of Sugar City evacuated; those who stayed greatly underestimated the flood. Edward Evans, 78, remained in his two-story log home to keep an eye on his livestock. Evans spent the night in his waterborne home, knocked off its foundation and split in two. “I barely made it up the stairs; the water was right at my heels.”

The people in Rexburg evacuated to the hill. They watched in disbelief. Families searched for loved ones who had been elsewhere that Saturday morning, hoping they too had retreated in time.

Rexburg, as the flood water started to recede.

This photo shows the destruction on the west side of Rexburg near the Municipal Golf Course. Large logs, splintered lumber, a barrel, a camping trailer, an automobile, and all types of debris washed into a gulley next to the chewed-up road.
The photo at the right shows four mobile homes west of town. (See the Menan Buttes in the background.) Dislodged from their nearby foundations, the flood carried them away until they came to rest on the bank of this irrigation canal.

Ricks College opened its dormitories and apartments. They provided food to the displaced. Thousands of volunteers from Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming came to help flood victims clean up. Those who lost their homes eventually lived in temporary HUD trailers issued by the government.

At least 250 businesses were rendered inoperable. Some buildings were too damaged to repair. In the photo to the right, a wrecking ball knocks down a building on Rexburg’s Main Street. The location, once home to Johnson Drug, the Shoe Haus, and Bowen Music, was replaced by a new structure.

Over 100,000 acres of farmland were affected and over 15,000 livestock were lost. Millions of dollars worth of farm equipment was destroyed. Twenty-five thousand people were left homeless. Approximately 733 homes were obliterated and 3,000 damaged. Many of the damaged homes were later demolished. One hundred thousand acres of agriculture were disrupted – 3,000 permanently. The initial estimate of the losses was placed at one billion dollars. More importantly, six people drowned in the flood and five others died in flood-related incidents.

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