

for Post-Registe

Special editions printed with award winning reports, photographs

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1980

June 5, 1976, started out as a typical Saturday for the skeletal staff of The Post-Register. The early edition was about wrapped up. Most employees had gone home. But then, suddenly, the phone rang with a blockbuster of a news tip — the Teton Dam had collapsed spewing millions of gallons of water into the valley.

A solid wall of water had cascaded through Sugar City, and Rexburg was partially submerged except for a few areas on the hill. Death, chaos and destruction followed the roar of water's flow.

"It was by far the biggest story The Post-Register has ever had. Nothing else has really even come close," Jim Howard, who was the managing editor at the time, said. Howard noted that the story was big news for months, even years.

Within hours after the news broke, the newsroom began to buzz with employees who voluntarily gave up their day off to help.

Hub of activity

Within 24 hours, the newsroom, normally a darkened quiet place on Sunday, became the hub for disaster coverage as reporters from across the country converged. News personnel using Post-Register facilities included reporters and photographers from the Los Angeles Times, London Evening Telegraph, Deseret News, Salt Lake Tribune, The Associated Press, the Lewiston Tribune and several national magazines, including Newsweek and Time.

But by far the most thorough coverage came from the staff of The Post-Register itself.

From the beginning, the staff assembled the news as quickly and efficiently as possible.

As soon as the news tip was received, valley reporter Chris Dunagan began trying to verify it. He called personnel at the dam site itself, but the confusion prevented him from getting much coherent information.

But the receptionist at the dam site who answered the phone was in a virtual state of shock and too flustered to talk — indicating something had happened.

Later, Dunagan did verify that the dam gave way and a catastrophe was occurring.

Took to the air

Within minutes the staff had contacted a local flying service to charter an airplane to get photographers in the air for a first-hand look and pictures of the situation. About an hour later photographer Robert Bower and sports editor Bob Hudson who had happened by the newsroom on his day off were in the air with cameras.

Dunagan later described the scene as "...total devastation. People are shocked, standing around. They can't believe what's going on."

Meanwhile Dunagan, Howard and other staffers were piecing together a story through interviews, notes from the police scanner radio and other sources. Other reporters checked into the office to start checking agencies and sources of information to get the full story together.

At about 4 p.m., only two hours later than usual, the fruits of the research showed up in print. "Teton Dam blows out, valley flooded," the banner headline said, with accompanying aerial photos of flooded homes and the remains of the dam with water rushing out.

Total coverage

The entire front page was covered with stories about the flood, feature stories, some history and a brief story warning that the effects might be felt in Idaho Falls and Blackfoot because of possible flooding of the Snake River, which, indeed, did happen.

"Looking back, that was a pretty comprehensive initial story," Howard said, "that was put together in about three hours writing time from the first news tip."

Of course, coverage of the story was far from over after that first edition. The next day a "flood special" was put together with a dramatic picture of raging water from the flood-swollen Snake River cascading onto the Broadway bridge filling the top half of the front page.

Many more stories, especially features, followed. Human interest stories of dramatic rescues, eye witness accounts and analysis stories were among the most common. "Virtually every edition for the next five days was a "special edition" with stories and photographs about the flood," Howard noted.

It was an especially busy time for photographers.

"Our photographers, Bower and Doug Brown, and regular editorial staffers were really with it," Howard remembered. "They were producing so many top quality photos that The Associated Press sent a man here whose primary job was putting them on the wire circuit (AP wirephoto)."

The Post-Register later received an honorary citation from the AP for its contribution of photographs, news accounts, features and coverage of the crisis.