

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Andrew Nelson-Experiences of the Depression

By Andrew Nelson

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Box 2 Folder 18

Oral Interview conducted by Lonnie Bullard

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi February 2005

Brigham Young University-Idaho

I am Lonnie Bullard. Today is March 30, 1974, and I am going to interview Andrew Nelson. The general topic will be the effects of the depression in Idaho.

Lonnie Bullard (LB): Mr. Nelson, where were you born?

Andrew Nelson (AN): In Smithfield, Utah.

LB: Okay and how long have you lived in Rexburg or surrounding area?

AN: 77 years.

LB: Okay and where were your parents born?

AN: My parents were born in Smithfield, Utah.

LB: What has been your occupation or occupations during your life?

AN: Teaching school and farming.

LB: Okay, and Mr. Nelson, when did the depression hit Idaho?

AN: The depression, the first depression under Hoover began in 1930 or 31, along in there.

LB: In your opinion, what do you think was really the cause of this depression?

AN: The cause of the depression was ...it probably had several causes. The first cause I think probably was due to the high prices that occurred during the First World War. I say high prices because these high prices brought about a great desire of the people to make money. Particularly did it occur among the farming industries. When the war was over the depression didn't start immediately. It took several years. No depression occurs immediately. It takes a long while to produce it. The prices of farm produce fell sharply after World War I probably about 1921. That would allow about three years for the gradual fall of prices. Beginning then, the prices stayed low for a period of years. About this time there was a bad condition throughout the Middle West. They had drought and terrific winds that blew their soil off, and many of them left their farms and made their way to California, without anything but just their faith in their ability to get work and provisions in California. This had a bad influence upon the agricultural condition; it had its effects upon business. Well, not only in this particular section was there trouble, but in other sections of the country the same thing happened-the falling of prices and the loss of income. Thereby and for this reason the merchants began to lose money. Then the main businessmen of the country-the industries, the manufacturers-began to lose money because the merchants didn't order anything from them, didn't order as much as probably; and consequence, they began laying off men. Well, that was the beginning of the unemployment.

There's another factor in this case too, and this factor is related to our foreign trade. Our foreign trade fell off because of the conditions in Europe. And then, after the United States had granted them millions of dollars to sustain themselves, they began to recover from their financial troubles and their manufacturers began to come to United States. These manufacturers, these goods that were brought into the United States were sold at a lower price that they could be produced in the United States. And as consequence it has an effect upon the industries, like the manufacturing of clothing and the manufacturing of various other goods that the people buy. They brought farm goods because of their cheapness, just like they do now. As a consequence there was a lack of trade from the American industries. Well, that was another factor in dropping men from work.

There was still another factor that induced the depression. During the war, there had been a boom in industry and many men had been taken to Europe. They were under the employ as soldiers of the US government, and while they were employed by the United States government there was plenty of employment in the United States due to the condition that the war brought about. When this condition became common throughout the country it resulted in a gradual elimination of labor from their work. You can readily see how that could happen. And when the boys came home, they didn't come home immediately after the war. It took several years before they all came home, but as they come home they have to have jobs; and they didn't have any jobs right away because of the condition of the country. And that was another factor that had its influence on the trade and economy of the country. Because of these conditions, they were gradual; I want to remind you that they were gradual. They didn't come all at once. It was over a period of years. It probably took about six or seven or maybe even eight years before it was finally coming to a climax in Hoover's administration. And in his administration, the unemployment was exceedingly high in the United States. And that brought what we call the depression.

This doesn't mean that all of the people in the country had a depression. I want to call your attention to the fact that there were many people also employed. Government officials, government offices, senators, representatives, and presidents and governors of states. All of those didn't suffer the consequences of the depression because they had wages, you see. The ones that suffered the consequences of the depression were the unemployed. You can readily see that without work they had difficulty in making a living.

Some of them had families, and it was hard for them. In this extreme condition, thousands of them got together and decided they would move upon Washington and petition the President for help. And they went to Washington and President Hoover became somewhat frightened at the number of men that were coming to Washington due to the conditions and due to the fact that he had no way to help them. So he ordered the army out, and he eliminated them from the city of Washington, wouldn't let them in. Well this as far as that condition throughout the United States, it was a very bad condition economically as you can see. When people don't earn money, they can't spend it; and when they don't spend it, those who rely on them spending it were businesses and industries-suffer the consequences. The depression didn't have too much effect of the

sparsely settled countries. The population of Idaho was too great and as a general rule, it's my opinion from what I lived through, that the depression didn't have too serious effect on Idaho. There was some trouble but not a great deal; and as a consequence of that, there were a very few people who were depressed in Idaho. There were a few. A few farmers lost their farms, not being able to make their payments, and a few businesses, but as a whole Idaho didn't suffer too severely in the depression, especially in this area of the country, in Southeastern Idaho. We had less depression here. We felt the effect less than they did in other sections.

LB: Okay, we've talked about the depression landing in Hoover's Administration. Did Hoover at anytime do anything to relief the situation or try to do away with the depression?

AN: Hoover's ability as a president was good in one way. That is he could get action from Congress, and he had the idea in his mind that if he got the industries to go again, they would hire the men and that would do away with unemployment. And so, he asked Congress to donate a great many million dollars to the industries for the purpose of hiring labor, hiring these unemployed. Congress passed the bill, and the money was handed over to the industries. But, on their part they didn't take advantage of it. They figured that if they manufactured goods, I suppose that's the way they figured that they couldn't sell them anyhow. And their business, of course, had suffered somewhat; and so they took the money and applied it to their business accounts and they didn't hire any men to fulfill the desires of President Hoover. Of course, that was a great disappointment and that was toward the latter part of his administration. About 1931- I guess it was the worst in 1931, and his administration was nearly at an end then. He had another year to go on, and he managed to get through some way until the next election. But, President Hoover didn't have the right idea. He was anxious to supply money, but he did it in the wrong way. He didn't put it in the hands of the people. What followed showed what would result if the money were put into the hands of the people instead of the hands of industries.

LB: We've talked about what followed. Of course, President Roosevelt was our next President. In what ways did Roosevelt act to overcome the unemployment?

AN: As soon as he was elected he went back right to work on finding means to distribute money to the people. And there was an instituted administration called the Works Progress Administration. And this was an administration that provided for hiring all of the unemployed throughout the United States. And the government would pay the bill. He provided the, or in the law provided the method of administration which was to use this money, and this labor, for the purpose of progressively helping the country. In other words, it applied to the building of roads, to the work in the cities where they needed parks, to the forests, particularly the teenagers were taken, and they were paid wages and turned into the forests; and they had different camps for them all over the country where by they labored. Well as soon as this money began to be scattered out, throughout the country, it became effective. In all the counties of Idaho, and I suppose in the United States. In Madison County particularly I was more or less involved, and in Madison County we did lots of works on the road. We hired the farmers, and we hired the other

laborers who needed work; and while absolutely it wasn't essential, yet, it was very helpful. It was helpful in the fact that the money that came to the county this was given to these laborers; and as soon as they began to get the money, they began to spend it; and as soon as the merchants began to prosper, they began buying goods from the industries, the manufacturers, and they began to prosper. And there it was, from all over the country the same thing was happening; and as a consequence, the country rose out of the depression, and there were no unemployed in the country.

LB: You said that in Madison County you were involved in this work. Could you tell us the extent of your involvement and maybe what office you held?

AN: During this particular time of recovery, in the beginning of President Roosevelt's administration in '33 and '34, I was County Commissioner, one of the County Commissioners of Madison County. The commissioners each had their work. The three commissioners took and divided the county into the several districts that they were elected from, so to speak. I was given the South end of the country, and Ernest Blouser was given the Northwestern area. And Richard Williams was given the Northeastern section of the country. And work of our districts was properly accorded. And as far as I was concerned I did a lot of overseeing the building of roads in the South part of the county. That was my job.

LB: May be we should get a little background. Could you tell us your occupation during the depression and how large your family was, and if it hurt your family very much?

AN: Well, I was farming most of the time during the depression; and as a farmer, I didn't notice too much difference in the depression from any other time. The work that I had to do, of course, kept me busy; but it gave me a pretty good knowledge of how the depression was affecting the farmers in the county. And as a general rule throughout the county, it wasn't too serious. There were probably a few farmers who had trouble on account of the lower prices- the prices were low during that period and as a consequence, they didn't make as much money; but where they were out of debt, they were alright. Where they were in debt, they had a little trouble.

I had a family at that time. During the first part of Roosevelt's administration, I had nine children at that particular time; and of course, we all live on the farm. We got by fine because being on a farm we had all we needed to eat and we had what we needed to wear and were able to pay our taxes. We didn't suffer at all as far as that goes. And if I was any example of what it was like throughout the country, it was pretty much the same throughout the whole county and probably the state.

These depressions, I would like to emphasize particularly, that these depressions were depressions mostly in the industrial portions of the United States, where there were industries and manufacturing and that sort of work.

Just like it is today. The automobile countries, the manufacturers of automobiles, are laying off men by the thousands. Well, it doesn't affect the farmers any because they

were laying off men; but it does affect and depress the fellows that are getting out of work. Those are the ones the depression strikes. The ones that had farms, unless they are deeply involved in debt; and the ones that had jobs, and are drawing their wages; the depression doesn't have much effect. It was those, and they were relatively few in the state of Idaho. Of course, I don't want to give the impression that there weren't any, but there were few in comparison to the population of the state. And in states like Illinois and New York and in the states that had highly industrialized conditions, the depression was great. And in those areas of business the merchants suffered heavily. You could see that because they didn't have enough trade you see. But in the rural districts like Idaho, I don't think the merchants suffered too severely. They probably suffered some because there wasn't as much money as there was before. As there was during the period of the war time, you see. During the period of war time everything was booming, wages were high, and there was no unemployment. In fact, they had trouble getting enough men. The urgency was so great that they tried best to get as many men as they could. People, young men, from this district went to the coast, because they could get good work and good wages. That was during the war period, but of course, when the war ended after several years, there was a gradual decline, and as that gradual decline came and as there was a loss of buying power the men lost their jobs and they came home here to the state where they left. And I suppose that was common all over. Leaving those jobs and going to their homes and as I mentioned before, it was the industrialized districts that suffered the most, both on the standpoint of merchants, business and industries. The farmers themselves didn't take as much money, of course; but they got by and didn't suffer too much, as a general rule. There were a few; but as a general rule, they didn't suffer too much. Those people that lost their farms and left their farms in the mid United States; in Kansas and Oklahoma and through Nebraska and through Nebraska and probably in some part of Texas; due to the winds and due to the drought. That wasn't the result of the depression. That was a climatic condition that forced that; and those people, while in the depression on their part. They left their homes. They left their farms, and they came to west to the coast because they thought they would have a better chance there. Well they did, they got by. When they got to the coast they managed to get by some way. I think the government helped some of them on the account of the depression.

Just like when there's a bad condition in a particular end of the country, where there's an earthquake or where there's a fire or flood, they get a little help, you see, from the government, so that they won't starve. For this same reason these fellows got help in this particular district. Those are due to climatic conditions and that you might say would cause a depression, as far as they were concerned. We have the same condition present occasionally in our own country; we have an example in Mexico, of that city being destroyed by an earthquake. That caused a lot of trouble and they received help from different countries. The United States gave help and so forth. So these episodes where some climatic condition produce havoc. So you can't hardly call that a depression like the depression we had under Hoover. That was a depression that hurt the country.

One of the reasons that we are having trouble and having a sort of depression at the present time is due to the fact that our foreign trade, that had its effect before automobiles and other goods have been imported into this country in wholesale quantities; and as a

consequence, the automobile industries and the other industries in the country have been affected by that. American labor has been affected. American millionaires, American industrialists have gone to other countries to establish their businesses, because they could get cheaper labor. What's the result? Ford went to England and those other companies went to countries, some companies went to Japan and the goods that were manufactured by these cheaper labor were being imported into the United States like they are being and have been for the last number of years. And a result, whose automobiles are people buying? The ones from Europe, the ones from Japan, not the ones from the United States. Why do they do it? Because they can get them cheaper. What does that do? That prevents the American industries from selling their cars and selling other different articles, all kind of articles. What's the result? Men are laid off because if they can't sell their goods, they can't use the men. That's the cause of the depression, and I think in a large sense Congress is responsible for not looking into those things and taking those matters in hand and taking care of them.

LB: Okay thank you very much Mr. Nelson. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by further researchers.