

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Austin Scoresby - Life during the Depression

By Austin Scoresby

December 1, 1974

Box 2 Folder 36

Oral Interview conducted by Ralph Scoresby

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin and Alina Mower

August 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. My name is Ralph Scoresby; this is taking place December 1, 1974. I'm going to interview Austin Scoresby. The general topic will be the Depression.

RS: Uncle Austin, where were you born?

AS: Pitsworth, Queensland, Australia.

RS: How long did you live there?

AS: Until I was seven years old.

RS: How long have you lived here in Idaho?

AS: Since 1906. Quite a long time.

RS: Where were your parents born?

AS: England.

RS: What has been your occupation mostly?

AS: Farming and general labor.

RS: So this general topic will be on the depression so when was the first year the depression started?

AS: The stock market crashed in 1929, but it didn't hit here real bad until, I guess, 1931 when we began to feel it the worst.

RS: Was the stock market the main cause of the depression?

AS: The stock market was some of the cause, but everything went haywire.

RS: You mentioned to me earlier that the price of things were all really low. Was this the stock market crashing the cause of all these prices going down hill?

AS: Well, I don't know, but generally they agreed that that had a great deal to do with it. Personally I'm not an economist so I couldn't tell for sure.

RS: You mentioned to me earlier that you can remember the prices of wheat and potatoes and everything. Did this have a bearing on your living when you couldn't get much out of your crops?

AS: For one thing, we didn't pay our 1934 taxes until 1940. The more you worked, the farther in debt you went.

RS: You just weren't required to pay taxes?

AS: Yes, we were required, but they put a, I don't know what you call it, but it didn't have to be paid. I forgot the name of it. We had to pay the rest of them. But that one year we were allowed to go that long before they were allowed to take your land.

RS: What year was that?

AS: Well, 1934 taxes, we just didn't have to pay them until 1940. That's the way I remember it.

RS: Was your farming operation, when you started farming, was it hard to farm because of the low prices?

AS: Certainly, when you were first starting out like we were. You would have been better off if you'd have wait until just after the depression instead of just going into it, because you were more in debt then you would have been if you would have bought just afterwards.

RS: Since I've been growing I've heard quite a bit about from what Grandpa, your brothers and you have told me about how it used to be, and I have often realized about what it would have been like to have to live back then. Like being growing up in those years. Did your children enjoy living then at that time?

AS: Our children were only small. They don't remember it.

RS: Did you enjoy the depression much or was it just hard living all the time?

AS: It was hard living all the time. There wasn't nothing to enjoy, you didn't have any money for anything. Nothing. You could hardly keep your kids warm. They just stripped these hills of wood to keep the home fires burning in the winter. You couldn't afford to buy coal.

RS: Was coal expensive?

AS: Well, it wasn't expensive, you just didn't have any money.

RS: So it was really hard living. You found it hard to make ends meet, right?

AS: You're not a kidding.

RS: You were just scrapping the bottom of the barrel all the time?

AS: Right, you didn't have any. You didn't have any money at all, you couldn't get any. You could go down to the factory and get a little bit of work in the winter--the fall and the winter, it was winter when we went.

RS: Is this the sugar factory out here?

AS: Yes. When I worked at the factory I just took bread and milk. That's all I had, that's all I took for lunch. Another time, beet sandwiches, just red beets you put between dry bread.

RS: Is that what you ate a lot at home?

AS: We had some vegetables in the summer time. We didn't have many vegetables kept over in the winter, of course, you had potatoes. There was plenty of them.

RS: My grandfather told me that they used to eat sparrow soup. Did you ever do that?

AS: We didn't eat that during the depression, we may have ate some earlier than that. Maybe in years gone by.

RS: I thought that--okay, never mind. I didn't realize how there could be the depression like that. I've often wondered what it would have been like to live back then, but I couldn't really realize it. Not having been able to pay taxes and scrimping and all the time. It just makes me kind of sick. Did it ever make you sick like that?

AS: Well, you were there and it just happened, you couldn't do anything at all about it. Nothing there you could do. Those who had a job, like there in the Post Office, or for the County, they could live even school teachers couldn't pay the moltrant warrants and went hey went to the bank to get cash out of it, they would deduct it, discount it. There was no money for anything. Only wealthy people and the money.

RS: Did the wealthy people have much problems living?

AS: A lot of people that had money made fortunes. Everything was cheap.

RS: During the depression?

AS: They didn't make it right then, but they bought up this cheap land and cheap products. They thought they would come up. And then as it raised up, why I knew one man that bought I don't know how many farms and when it began to raise here a few years ago, of course, he missed this last high price, but he made it.

RS: You say you didn't have much. Were you farming then?

AS: Yes.

RS: You couldn't get much out of your crops at all. You couldn't even make any money?

AS: No, you couldn't. Couldn't pay the debts. You could hardly live. You could just pay a little. What began to come in when Franklin D. Roosevelt got in was he provided some programs so you would make a little, and the county did they called it the WPA. They give you a little you'd got up with your team and wagon you work for a few days that give you just enough and they'd rotate it around and give a little to as many people as possible and just provide them with the bare necessities of life. Then on top of that they began to make agriculture programs. That's when this wheat program came in. Finally when World War II begin coming in prices begin coming in. It was rough going right up 'til then. That's what really lifted the depression is when World War II came in. Butter fat in cream was 11 cents all summer. One summer--eggs 8 cents a dozen, wheat 18 cents a bushel, if you could make any money at that. I don't know how you did it.

RS: Really high prices. What was the price of potatoes?

AS: You might sell your number 2's as low as 10 cents. One's on up to 50 cents. It varied you couldn't make any money. The more you worked, the worse you went into debt.

RS: So that might be the main story of the depression: "The more you worked, the more you went in debt?"

AS: That's right.

RS: Were there very many people who drove automobiles?

AS: Oh, there's a few that had them before the depression came in that drove them. We never owned an automobile that I know that in that case quite a while after the depression one between the two or three of us. We had a pickup that we used, but we never owned a pickup until 1941.

RS: This guy told me he could fill his car up with gas with a dollar.

AS: I don't know as I remember course I didn't buy any, he probably would remember that better than I did. All I remember is I didn't buy any and it's probably better that I didn't. The pumps up here in this service station in Iowa was in the neighborhood of 25 cents a gallon for that much, Rockefeller still made the money.

RS: What was the price of oil?

AS: I don't know because I never bought any. We bought a tractor in 1929, and it ran on fuels. It was the fuel oils, but they would run on regular petroleum. They gave us a particular one. It was an old rumbly tractor. Some of them used it. Conrads I know used straight petroleum in it. They had to take oil out of it cause they got too much in their in the tractor.

RS: Let's go back to this tax thing. Was this tax on everything?

AS: Land taxes is what I was talking about.

RS: Was it just land taxes you couldn't pay?

AS: And water taxes you just couldn't pay. There was some kind of a thing on it, I don't know what you call it, but they couldn't take your property, it was done legally. But it gave you a break so you could wait for a future date. But you could pay anything if you had the money and you could buy up a lot of stuff mighty cheap. People that had a good job had a better time in their life, everything was cheap. Their money went farther than anything.

RS: They just enjoyed it?

AS: Yes, they did, but agriculture was really depressed.

RS: Was that the main thing that hit really?

AS: Well, mainly--I worked on the section all one summer for 30 cents to 35 cents an hour.

RS: That's not a very good wage.

AS: That was a pretty good wage then all tell you. We thought it was. That was just before it hit.

RS: In 1929?

AS: When I done that in 1926. Last year I worked on the section. We divided that up just to have a few dollars.

RS: You just kinda supported on that. Were there any wages like that during the depression?

AS: Wages were mostly done by trading. We worked and then if we hired someone we gave them so much flour because you could take your wheat up here to Ucon and get about half the flour. Something like that I forget how much. If you hire someone to pitch bundles into the thrasher, the only way to pay was with flour. That's the only way you could and that wasn't very good pay.

RS: You must have worked pretty hard then?

AS: Just the same kind of work, the only thing is now they used thrashers and now combines. You see in wheat you had to plant it and then shark it and then trashing machine you had someone stack their grain and thrashed out of the stacks. It was that way for many years, ever since we came to the county. The combines came. Of course,

we didn't do any combining 'bout 'til in the 40's. We started the last of the 40's—I think your grandfather still thrashes.

RS: Dad can remember, he was thrashing when I was born.

AS: Well they did, but since that time they combine and, of course, it's a lot easier.

RS: Was the city of Idaho falls out here? Did Idaho Falls have many department stores for clothing and things like that?

AS: All Idaho Falls was in those days was right in the old part of town. Where Sears and Roebuck is now just swamp and sage brush.

RS: Downtown was clothing very cheap or expensive or everything?

AS: I bought a suit for \$13 and we paid so much on it every week or month. I forgot how much it was. It took us quite a while to buy a radio when radios began to come in. I don't know how long it took us to save.

RS: I can't imagine.

AS: You will one of these days.

RS: Trying to pay.

AS: We're headed for a depression right now. If times get like that. I don't know what this country will do because they've so many give away programs that's wrecking the government.

RS: Was the government involved much with it at all?

AS: None at all, not until Franklin D. Roosevelt got in. He's the originator of these government programs.

RS: They didn't even care?

AS: Well, I don't know if they cared or not, but they didn't do anything about it.

RS: What kind of programs did Franklin D. Roosevelt originate?

AS: Well, he started the wheat program and, of course, it went to one thing or another. Wheat was the first one he got going in this locality. But afterwards, under Truman, he started spuds but then the depression was over. But instead of using the program to start things a going again, it started to be political and give-away programs just went from bad to worse and the whole thing, the whole set up just bankrupted the United States. It did its, going bankrupt, that all it is.

RS: What was these programs actually for, like the wheat programs, what did they do?

AS: Well, they guaranteed so much for the price of wheat, they guaranteed it. You didn't get, they made it up. I forgot the whole detail of it.

RS: That's what all these programs are?

AS: Quite a lot of these programs originated back then. But mostly wheat here. That's how dry farmers began to get big.

RS: You mean they didn't use to be?

AS: Heavens No! They used to have 320 acres was a big farm. That was a good farm. A lot of them just had 160 acres, and they lived on it. John Stosich down here raised his family on 28 acres of irrigated ground and he done a pretty good job of it you might think that sounds fishy, but it isn't.

RS: During the depression?

AS: Oh yes. And quite a few years after he raised good crops and he raised mostly sugar beets.

RS: On 28 acres?

AS: Yes.

RS: That hardly seems possible.

AS: Well it does, but things weren't as high as they are now. And we didn't raise as good of crops as we do now. Because in the depression we didn't have any nitrogen to buy. Except for barnyard and manure and what you didn't get you had to rotate. We always had to have alfalfa in order to build up your nitrogen content in the ground.

RS: Did this effect the agriculture crops quite a bit then?

AS: Well sure it did, it affected them.

RS: Did fertilizers come during or after?

AS: Well, I think phosphate came during the depression and nitrogen came, I think it was the 40's.

RS: What was the prices of fertilizers then? When they came out?

AS: Sugar Co. was only one that handled it, but I forget the prices. It was in accordance with the sugar beets. You see we got it as low as \$4.50 a ton for sugar beets.

RS: Four and half cents?

AS: Tons \$4.50 a ton for 2,000 pounds.

RS: That's quite a bit now though, the cost of it would be quite a bit for that much.

AS: Well you use to thin beets for \$6.00 an acre.

RS: Was that with help coming in?

AS: Help mostly, we had help from states. We had men that lived in California in the winter that would come up every year then they'd thin beets for us. Then they'd go some place else, of course, it wasn't the same men, but the one crew came back every year. But if you got a good job in California or wherever you didn't have to come back again. They'd thin better than an acre of beets a day and they'd do it day in and day out. And they worked from daylight until dark.

RS: And they only got \$6 for every acre?

AS: That was the only money you could pick up. We had people come and help us top beets from Missouri because there was no money over there so they came to the West to work in beets where little cash was.

RS: So, I guess some people thought there was money in agriculture and other people didn't, right?

AS: Well, you didn't go into just anything. You just had no money to do anything with. How could you go into a business; you was there and you was stuck, that's all there was to it.

RS: Were there any major colleges that kept going or quit?

AS: There were colleges, Ricks College was going. I didn't go during the depression, I went before and I remember my whole years tuition was \$37.50.

RS: Do you have any idea what tuition was in the depression?

AS: No I don't. That was in 1922 and 1923 that I went.

RS: It might have been quite low in the depression.

AS: It probably was.

RS: Well, I can't think of much more to say, do you have anything else you might remember?

AS: No.

RS: From what we talked about?

AS: That's about all I can remember.