

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

Catherine Gertrude Ronnenkamp
Englund – The Depression in Idaho

By Catherine Gertrude Ronnenkamp Englund

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Box 1 Folder 35

Oral Interview conducted by Orillia Hancock

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi May 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is Oral History. I am Orilla Hancock. Today on March 21, 1974, I am going to interview Catherine Gertrude Ronnenkamp Englund. The general topic will be "Life during the Depression." Since Mrs. Englund is my aunt, I will call her Aunt Katie.

Orilla Hancock (OH): Auntie Katie, where were you born?

Catherine Englund (CE): In Hibbard, Idaho.

OH: How long have you lived here in Rexburg?

CE: Oh, since about 1922 or '23.

OH: Where were your parents born, Aunt Katie?

CE: Germany.

OH: At this time during the depression, what was your occupation?

CE: A housewife, I was a housewife.

OH: What do you remember most about the depression, Auntie Katie?

CE: Well, the most I remember about the depression, we didn't have no cars nor anything like that. We had to do our own work. We'd cut our own hair and do our own sewing.

OH: You mentioned earlier that the janitor of the school would cut some of the children's hair, is this right?

CE: Yes, and he would send what children he couldn't cut their hair and send down to me, and I'd cut their hair for nothing.

OH: Why did the janitor cut children's hair?

CE: Because their hair got so long, and he couldn't stand it no longer, so he decided that he'd cut their hair.

OH: Did they have barbers in those days, or is this just a new thing?

CE: No, they had barbers there. The price for a haircut was only 25¢, but people couldn't afford to pay this 25¢ to have their kid's hair cut.

OH: At what time do you think you felt the depression mostly?

CE: I just don't know. I guess at no particular time. We always had plenty, and so we didn't feel it only when we had to go somewhere, and we had to walk because we lived in town and didn't have no horses or anything so that that was the worst.

OH: Do you think the depression had any effect on your family, a family, your family relationship?

CE: Well, I guess it made us closer together. We all worked together, and I think that was the only thing that was any difference.

OH: Where did your family work during the depression?

CE: Well, the boys and Grace (her children) worked at the show house and then in fall, we would all pick potatoes so we worked in the potato fields.

OH: What was your husband doing at this time?

CE: Well, he worked on the railroads and different places and sometimes in Utah and sometimes in Idaho. Wherever they were working on the railroad, was where he went.

OH: And do you think that your family was more fortunate than other families in this area during the depression?

CE: Yes, I think so because we had plenty of ground to raise a big garden and I could sew and cut hair and the likes of that. And you know that's quite important.

OH: Auntie Katie, did you see families around you that had the depression real hard in their days?

CE: Yes, there was a few families that had quite a few children and didn't have the ground to raise a garden and that and their mother didn't know how to sew nor cut hair, so that made it quite hard for the children. That was some of the kids' hair I cut.

OH: So you feel like those who had plenty of ground and jobs didn't feel the depression so bad?

CE: No, we sure didn't feel the depression like some others.

OH: You mentioned the prices. Did the prices go down during the depression as to what they were usually or did they go up?

CE: No, I guess that they was about the same. We could buy a real nice pair of shoes for \$2.50 and the children's shoes for a dollar. I bought some for 75¢, real nice leather shoes for the little ones.

OH: And what were the prices of other things, was it so you could afford things that you wanted during the depression?

CE: Yes, pretty good material was as low as 11¢ a yard and 25¢ a yard. And meat was cheap. You could get a soup bone with a lot of meat on it for two bits, 50¢. Meat was cheap and so was material and shoes and anything to wear. Ten cents for a pair of socks and for little ones, five cents for stockings, so things were really cheap in them days.

OH: How long do you think the depression lasted around in this Rexburg area?

CE: Oh, I think only for a few years. I don't remember just how many, but I don't think it was for very many years because it was a farming community around, you know, and a lot of people could get out and get work if they could, you know, so I don't think it lasted too many years.

OH: Where did most people go for work if they needed work?

CE: Well, they either went mostly on farms but like my husband, he went on the railroad, and he knew the guy that was making roads to the railroad to new places, you know, that's why he worked on the railroad but not too many got onto it like this; it was mostly farm work.

OH: In this farm work, was the farmers just providing for themselves, or was they selling their crops to others for profit?

CE: Oh, yes. They would sell their grain. I think we got 50¢ a bushel for wheat, something like that, and hay was cheap, anything you know. Prices weren't high in them days. Prices were real reasonable.

OH: At the beginning of the depression, how many children did you have at this time?

CE: Six

OH: You had six children at the beginning?

CE: Yes, I had six.

OH: And were they small children?

CE: Well, some of them were smaller than others. I had four boys and two girls and later on I had another boy, later on.

OH: You mentioned before that even your children will go out and have jobs, is this right?

CE: Yes, we would go and pick up potatoes. Of course, two of the boys and Grace had work in the showhouse.

OH: Did they do this because of the depression, or did they just want to work?

CE: They just wanted to work, I guess.

OH: Do you remember how the depression was in view of the country?

CE: Yes, there was quite a few homes vacant in town because the families had to move away where they could get work, so there was lots of homes that you could rent or was vacant anyway. And some left their furniture and some took their furniture with them.

OH: Was jobs more plentiful in other parts?

CE: I imagine because there was different work in different places, building, plumbing, and different things like that, so they went for that.

OH: Did any of your family move in order to find more work?

CE: Only my husband. He went, and I stayed here because I had too many kids to take along, because they went to school, you know so I couldn't go. Nope, I had to stay.

OH: Do you remember how the government was during these days?

CE: I guess it was no different that it is now that I remember of. They helped the poor, I know that. They had flour to give to those who needed it and different commodities that I remember that some went and got, but we didn't have to.

OH: They gave things away free to those who needed it?

CE: Yes, it was all free. They shipped it in from outside. You could get flour, or mush, anything, you know, that they gave to the poor, to the needy, you know, that needed it.

OH: Aunt Katie, how do you think that the depression affected the community as people?

CE: I think it brought us closer together because if one needed help, if it was sewing or canning fruit or whatever it was, cutting kids hair or whatever it was, we was willing to go out and help one another and if we couldn't go, they would come to your home, and we would do for them what we could. In that way, it made people more agreeable or more sociable or something, you know, because we'd help one another more than they do nowadays. Nowadays they don't think about anybody, but in those days we sure did. And if we had anything like garden stuff to give away we would tell them to come and get, you know, we divided, we shared. I think it learned people to share, depression does.

OH: Did people still get out socially?

CE: Oh, we went to church and a few things like that. Sometimes they had dances on Friday nights. And we only went to Sunday meeting and night meeting, that was all on Sunday and then the Mutual had their mutual on Tuesday nights, that was the only

difference. Now there is something doing almost everyday in the week, and there was only Sunday and Tuesday was Mutual.

OH: So the people still got out about the same?

CE: Yes, they got out and mingled together. Of course, a lot of us only had to walk, you know. We was here in town, and we would walk.

OH: What would the people do that lived out in the country?

CE: Well, they would have horses and buggies and sleighs in the winter, but here in town we had no use for that, you know.

OH: Did the children that lived out in the country come in town for school? Where did they go to school at?

CE: Well, each like Hibbard and Burton and Independence, they all had a school of their own and only those that was going to the eighth grade that wanted to come to Rexburg on their own would come to Rexburg. Of course, they would have the buggies, you know, to come into town with.

OH: How many grades of school would the children go through? Was it eight or was it longer than that?

CE: Just to the eight grade and then they graduated from the eighth grade, and then they were ready for high school.

OH: And most of the children go to High School?

CE: Very few, very few.

OH: Was this because of the depression or was it not just what most kids did anyway?

CE: Well, and there wasn't too many people in the community like there is now. You know a lot of the children went to High school, but the population wasn't much and that was the reason why. There wasn't too many in the country. But now it has been growing. The last 40 or 50 years you wouldn't know the place. From the corner, that Mrs. Cook wasn't there. There was one house for a mile down, from here, there was only one house, and now there is dozens of them.

OH: Aunt Katie, do you think you had to work any harder than the rest of the people around here for what you had?

CE: No, I don't think I worked any harder. Of course, I had a large garden, but I had the children, and they all helped, and so we got over that quite fast. And if the neighbor kids wanted my kids to go fishing or something with them, they would come and do a few

rows, you know, so they, we done so many rows done to get over in a week, you know, so the neighbor kids would come and help so they could go fishing.

OH: So you don't feel you had to work any harder than anybody else?

CE: No, I don't think I had to work any harder than anybody else?

OH: How was just an everyday life, what was that like?

CE: Well, we washed on the washboard, and we had to heat our water in a boiler on the stove, and this was a coal stove or a wood stove. At first, we didn't have plumbing in the house. A lot of us didn't have plumbing in the house, so we had a pump outside so we had to pump our water and brought it in and heated it on the boiler on the stove. And we didn't have electric irons. We had stove irons, so we had to heat out iron on the stove, and at first we had to see that we had enough wood or coal to see that we had enough to do our wash, our clothes, so we went out and had to make a fire to do our ironing in the heat. We didn't have electric irons nor anything like that--- no refrigerators or anything like that.

OH: Were there those who did have these things?

CE: Very few. I didn't know of anybody, not in the depression.

OH: You think this was because of the depression then?

CE: No, really I don't think it was on account of the depression. There wasn't too much of this, you know, too many things like cars. There was a few cars but only the very rich had the cars, you know. It wasn't going like it is now. Now most everybody had electric irons and fridges and cars and like that but it wasn't like that in them days.

OH: Do you remember hearing anything about what other people did and how their life was in the depression, I mean outside of Idaho and this community?

CE: Well, in Layton (Utah) they had it just about like we did, you know. My brother lived in Layton, but they had a little farm so they didn't notice much of the depression – just like us, you know, too.

OH: Do you remember anything being said about big cities or things like this in the East California or different places?

CE: Oh, we heard about them and what was going on there, and we was glad we was living in Idaho.

OH: Can you remember anything in particular of what they had?

CE: Well, I guess the country wasn't populated like it is now, you know. There was now in California they had, oh, little garden spots where a lot of people raised their gardens, you know. They could raise most anything. They would have a tree or two or three, different kind of fruit trees on their place, and they raised their own fruit, so it was, I think, about the same. People that wanted to work and take care of their things they could plant what they figured on using. Of course, they had orange trees and different things like that. They grew it year around, so I guess they didn't put up as much fruit as we do here.

OH: The depression started with the stock market crash, isn't that right?

CE: Yes, and after that a lot of the banks closed down, but your money was still there, you know. And it was closed for quite a while so you couldn't write any checks or get your money out of the banks. You just used what you had but then your money was there when they opened the banks later on, you know, weeks or months later on. You could still get your money, the banks didn't go broke, but your money was still there, but you couldn't get it.

OH: Why did they close the banks?

CE: Because, I think, they was afraid that, I don't know what they was afraid of but they just decided they would close the banks. Oh, some banks went broke, and some people lost quite a bit of money, but the banks here Rexburg didn't. But, some on the outside, you know, Arlene's (Katie's daughter-in-law) father he lost quite a few thousand dollars in that bank in Teton. So he lost quite a bit. When the banks opened, his money was gone, but here in Rexburg, it didn't happen like that.

OH: Do you think they closed just because other banks were closing at this time?

CE: Well, I guess when one bank closed, all the smaller banks closed. When one did, I think they all did. I don't think the real big ones like in Salt Lake or in bigger cities or larger banks... I don't think they closed – I didn't hear of it if they did, so I wouldn't know.

OH: How about the merchants and stores in this area, did they keep on with business?

CE: Yes, but the people in them days didn't charge much. They just went along with what they had. Of course, things were pretty cheap, like I said, you could buy a soup bone and you would have all the meat a family could eat and still have a soup bone and have a little soup off from it. And you could get some hamburger, two bits for hamburger that would do for a family of eight – and nowadays. So, everything was really cheap, and like I say, then you could go and get the commodities so, you know, I guess the church or whoever did it, I don't remember who done it, but anyway, the poor could go and get what they needed up there, up where they had the commodities to let out.

OH: Did you feel any greediness with the people around, with the store merchants or with the people; do you think they ever got greedy?

CE: May be some of them did, but we never knowd about it—never heard about it. No, I don't think so.

OH: You mentioned before that your husband worked on the railroad. How much was he paid for working on the railroad?

CE: Oh, I don't just remember how much it was, but I think \$150 a month.

OH: Was this a good wage for the depression?

CE: Oh yes, that was a really good wage.

OH: What were other men earning with their jobs, do you remember?

CE: Well, here at the sugar factory they worked for a week for \$25. Eight and ten, ten hours a day. The sugar factory was going in them days, too, and \$2.50 a day was outrageous wages they thought, so the wages was. Well, the money was valued a lot too. You could buy a lot for \$2 you know. If you had \$10 to go to town to buy groceries, you could get your flour, 100 lbs. of flour, 100 lbs of sugar, and 25 lbs of oatmeal, or all the wheat much and shoes and stuff for your kids and like that, you know. Now \$10 don't hardly buy a thing.

OH: You mentioned the sugar factory. Where was the sugar factory that these men worked at?

CE: Well, there was one up here in Sugar City that was the one that most of them went up to, Sugar City.

OH: Did the Sugar Factory employ a lot of men at this time?

CE: Quite a number, yes. Quite a number of men, yep.

OH: Auntie Katie, when the depression was over, did you feel the change was a gradual change or was it an abrupt change?

CE: As far as I can see, I think it was a gradual change because it didn't make too much difference with us, you know, because we never felt the depression at no time, only what we seen around what other families had, so I think it was quite gradual.

OH: Do you think that world-wide, it was also a gradual change?

CE: Well, I imagine it would be. I think it would be a gradual change, you know, because people didn't suffer too much because they always had where they could get help from,

you know, from either... from the church or from the county or whoever provided help for those who needed help.

OH: Were there government elections during this time?

CE: Yes, I guess there was, but I don't remember just who was in at that time. I never paid too much attention to it, you know.

OH: Oh, then you don't remember the plans that they had for getting over the depression?

CE: Well, I don't know what caused the depression, and I don't know what ended it. I guess it was just gradual, you know.

OH: And do you think people did anything in particular to change the depression to better times?

CE: I don't think so. I think it had more to do with the war, because I think then there is always a war follows, you know, and when that war follows, there's good times again. It seems that way, so I wouldn't know any different than that.

OH: Do you feel the war improved times?

CE: I don't think so. I think it had more to do with the war, because I think then there is always... a war follows, you know, and when that war follows, there's good times again. It seems that way, so I wouldn't know any different than that.

OH: Do you feel the war improved times?

CE: Financially, yes. It was hard to say, but it seems like when there is war there is never hard times, you know, and there is always plenty.

OH: In what ways?

CE: Oh, there is plenty of work, because they take a lot of the young men, you know, there is always work for more. Even I had to go out and help harvest when Laree and Elmer was out on the dry farm – that's my daughter and her husband. I went up two years and harvested to help them. They couldn't get men to harvest with, so I went up and helped them.

OH: In closing then, Auntie Katie, do you feel like you didn't feel the depression as hard as others?

CE: Yes, I don't feel we felt the depression as hard as others because we were better fixed than others.

OH: You always had plenty, so you really wasn't bothered?

CE: Yes, we had plenty.

OH: Okay, Auntie Katie, thank you very much.

CE: You are sure welcome.

OH: So now this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.