

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Earl C. Hammond - Life during the Depression

By Earl C. Hammond

March 15, 1975

Box 1 Folder 46

Oral Interview conducted by Clarence Hammond

Transcribed by Kurt Hunsaker June 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

CH: This is oral history. I am Clarence Hammond. Today is March 15, 1975. I am going to interview Earl C. Hammond. The general topic will be "How your family got along during the depression, and what you did to minimize the effects." Mr. Hammond, where were you born?

EH: Blackfoot, Idaho.

CH: How long have you lived in Blackfoot?

EH: I lived there from the time I was born until 1952 when we left and was gone about ten years and we came back to this area.

CH: Okay, where were Grandma and Grandpa born?

EH: My parents were born in Grantsville Utah, and moved to this area about 1902.

CH: Okay. What was your occupation during the depression?

EH: During the depression, the worst part of it, I was at home on the farm. I wasn't too old then (about fifteen), but I worked and done a lot of farm work around, just for neighbors and so on, and helped at home.

CH: What did your father do to support the family?

EH: My father had a small farm. He milked a few cows; he raised sugar beets, and potatoes.

CH: Well, what other ways did you earn money? Did other members of the family work?

EH: Oh, the boys that were old enough worked whenever they could. In the spring, even though we hated to thin beets, we were glad to see beet thinning time come so we could go and earn a little bit of money to buy some clothes and one thing or another. If we worked real hard, we could make two dollars and a half a day. Paid five dollars an acre for thinning beets and a half an acre a day was a real big day's work. And then, of course, during the summer we worked in the hay, pitching hay and stacking, weeding potatoes. I remember one summer I worked for Wayne and Stacy Bond pulling weeds out of the potatoes for fifteen cents an hour. At the end of six-ten hour days, I'd take home nine dollars, which wasn't much but it seemed like quite a lot then. Had a little bit of money to spend. And then, of course, in the fall there was topping beets and picking potatoes, and that's about the only kind of work that there was around at the time was, for us anyway, farm work.

CH: Do you think you were better off living on the farm than those people living in the city?

EH: Oh, I definitely were. We could raise quite a lot of our own food, had a big garden and chickens, and milk, and meat. Of course, there no deep freezes than, at least I don't think there were any in the country yet, but there was none around our area, we didn't have one. But mother used to can a lot of meat. Put it up in jars and in the pressure cooker, and then it would keep indefinitely that way. Probably sometimes better than any freezer, and it was real good. We had canned all kinds of vegetables and fruit. Whenever we could, we'd go Salmon fishing during the summer. There were five boys that had licenses in the family and we'd go out to Salmon River and sometimes two or three trips during the summer and bring back ten salmon. The limit was two salmon per each person. Mother would can most of these salmon to keep for the winter. At that time, it was legal to spear salmon, but before that you could spear them or take them any way you wanted to. There was plenty, seemed to be plenty of salmon all the time, but we didn't take us too many days to get our limit. We'd find them down in the deep holds and spear them.

CH: How'd you do that? Did you just throw a spear at them, or walk along the bank, or how did you get close enough to them to spear them?

EH: Well, if you lay down on a brush pile along the edge of the bank, or where the water washed back under into the bank, and look down in there, and most generally you can only see their trails. They've got their heads up under the brush. You can see their tails and they gradually kind of work down and back, you work your spear down in there real careful and get it just right over their backs, and wait until they're just right and then jab it as hard as you can and hang on. Some of those forty pound salmon sure put up a fight.

CH: How long were the spears you used?

EH: We used a spear that we'd made out of pitch forks and it had a handle, ten or twelve feet long. Our oldest brother had a steady job, he was working for De Kay Fuel and Feed delivering ice and coal. He was making ninety dollars a month, which was real good wages in those days. In fact, there was an article in the paper one time saying about the coal man makes more money than the bankers. Which was true, I guess, because that was pretty good wages then. That's one reason why we got by pretty well during the worst of the depression. He practically fed the whole family; we had a family of nine children. He brought home groceries and coal and everything. He'd also buy the shells we needed to hunt with. We'd go out and hunt sage hens which were real plentiful at that time. One year mother canned over a hundred sage hens, which really came in good later on. Some people that were, really had a hard time getting money for fuel and food and everything, a lot of people would wait until the freight train was going through loaded with coal, several cars of coal. Some of them would jump up on the train as it went through town and then after it got out of town, why they'd start throwing off lumps of coal, off from the cars and then some others would come along and gather it up, after the train got by. These people would get off the train after it would slow down again and that's the way a lot of people got their coal for heating their houses there for a few years.

CH: What was the limit on sage hens then?

EH: The limit was four sage hens a day. Had a ten day season. There was five of us that had licenses. And lots and lots of days we'd go out in the evening after Austin got off work and get twenty sage hens.

CH: Then you'd can them all?

EH: Well, not all of them. We ate a lot of them. With that many in the family, we ate a lot of them, but there was a lot more than we ate so mother canned a lot of them. Then, of course, we went deer hunting. We'd generally be able to get a couple of deer every fall, which helped out. Dad didn't have too many cows, but we'd certainly have one to butcher in the winter time. We actually got by pretty well compared to a lot of people at that time.

CH: Did you have to can all your meat in the winter time or did you just can part of it?

EH: Well, when we'd butcher, we'd try to butcher in the middle of winter, and as long as it was cold enough to keep it, we'd just cut off from it and eat as we needed it. Then when the weather started to warm to where the meat was liable to spoil then we'd can the rest of it, whatever was left.

CH: You hear about all the different government programs in the depression. How did some of them affect you?

EH: Well, the one program, to start with, I remember the best after President Roosevelt was elected, the same day or the day after he was inaugurated he closed all the banks in the country because there had been banks going broke every day. And he closed them all. I remember there was a lot of people all excited when he closed the banks. The ones that did happen to have a little money, why they thought they'd lost everything. But he just closed them, as I remember; it was about ten days before he got Congress to pass the Federal Deposit Insurance Law so to insure deposits in the banks. All banks were required to have it. There were a lot less banks went broke after that. But the ones that did, the people didn't lose their money because it was insured with the Federal Deposit Insurance. I remember at the time it seemed like my brother had a little cash money, and we bought a few groceries but when we was able to charge what we needed until the banks reopened and got a little money circulating again. President Roosevelt got the Congress to pass Work Progress Administration, W.P.A., which put a lot of people to work all over the country. Wages weren't big, but it helped a lot of people out to buy groceries until things got better. I imagine there was a lot of different types of work around the country, but in our area it was mostly working on the roads. All the roads, a good share of the roads were just dirt, then. All the farmers that wanted to, they could hire out their team and wagon and haul gravel on the roads. It sure helped out to get a lot of the roads graveled instead of having them muddy all winter and spring, besides helping out the people to get a little money to keep living until things started getting better.

I remember, I think, nearly everyone was in the same shape when they came to clothing. A lot of people had their own last and stand for repairing shoes. I know my

Dad used to repair all of our shoes. You used to have a piece of, buy a piece of leather and whittle out the own half soles, to tack on our shoes. Some people would take the side of an old tire and cut a piece of it the right size to nail on their shoes for soles. Of course, their overalls were all patched. Instead of wearing new overalls all the time, why there were sometimes more patches than anything else. You look back and think those were pretty rough times, but everybody came through pretty good shape anyway. It proved that people can do with a lot less than what they think they can now.

CH: Did your mother make a lot of your clothes?

EH: Well, not so much for the boys. Of course, there was only one girl and she made nearly all of her dresses. But she didn't make, as I remember, too many for the boys. My mother used to cut hair, besides our families. She cut hair for nearly everyone in the neighborhood. Seemed like every day there was some family there with all their kids getting their hair cut.

CH: You read about all the welfare and everything and it seems like you remember stories about how then people do just about anything instead of going on welfare. They'd live on practically nothing and do any job they could find rather than go on welfare. Do you have anything you want to say about that?

EH: Well, they did. People would take any kind of a job they could find. Trouble was there just weren't very many jobs around. One thing I was thinking about, my next younger brother, Norman, when he got out of high school, the day after he got out of school he went to work at the service station, Modern Motor, there. It was a while after that he was talking to a couple of his friends, and they were talking about somebody that their dad had given them a lot to get them started and one thing or another. One of the boys said, "Boy, my dad never did give me anything." Norman said, "Well, my dad gave me a lot." He said, "The day I got out of school I went down to Modern Motors and asked them for a job and the manager says 'Are you Fred Hammond's son?'" He said, "Yes." He said, "When can you go to work?" So Norman says, "My dad gave me a lot."

You wanted to know about the tires we used to use on the cars. I remember people taking one tire casing and cut the beads off from it and slip it over the tip of another tire and mismatch the holes in them. And rivet, use copper rivets, to rivet the outside tire to the inside tires like that 'cause they couldn't afford to buy new tires. Other times they used to make great big liners for tires and great big heavy boots. If you had a blow out in a tire, you could stick a great big boot in it and put your tube in. I often wondered what those tires would be like on the freeway today. It must, some of them, I know was five pounds out of balance. But on the dirt and gravel roads they weren't too bad, they kept it going. There was enough chuck holes that they didn't notice the extra weight on one side of the wheel.

CH: What was gas like then? Did you have any problem getting gas and how much was it?

EH: Oh no, there was plenty of gas. The only thing you had problem with was finding the money to buy it with. Gas was around twenty-five cents a gallon and most cars would make at least twenty-five miles to the gallon. So it wasn't really awful expensive as far as fuel was concerned.

CH: Thank you very much. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.