

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Elizabeth Spori Stowell-Experiences of World War I

By Elizabeth Spori Stowell

December 11, 1973

Box 2 Folder 41

Oral Interview conducted by Sharee Smith

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin February 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an Oral History. I am Sharee Smith. Today is December 11, 1973. I am going to interview Elizabeth Spori Stowell. The general topic will be on World War I.

SS: Mrs. Stowell, would you like to tell us your full name?

ES: My full name is Elizabeth Spori Stowell.

SS: Where were you born?

ES: I was born here in Rexburg.

SS: How long have you lived here in Rexburg?

ES: I've lived here all my life, except six years when I lived in Rigby.

SS: When were these six years?

ES: Those were the years when I was first married from 1911 to 1916.

SS: Where were your parents born?

ES: My parents were born in the old country, in Switzerland.

SS: Now, what have been your occupations?

ES: They were teachers, and we were teachers. It's seemed like for generations the Spori family especially has been engaged in the teaching profession. Our ancestors were professors for at least for five hundred years.

SS: Where did you teach?

ES: I taught here in Rexburg at the Washington School.

SS: Since we are talking about World War I today, I would like your feelings on what do you think caused World War I.

ES: I feel that we are naive, in this way, that we felt like the world was ours and that we were on top of it, and we didn't take much consideration for other peoples, and their troubles and trials. And I think that we felt there would never be another war; and when we plunged into it, it was such a surprise that we weren't nearly prepared for it while other nations in Europe had been preparing for years because we had wealth and all kinds of resources nobody would dare to attack us, and we needed more than that. We needed self-confidence, and we needed to know other countries better.

SS: What were your feelings towards President Wilson at this time?

ES: Well I thought that he was really one of the most wonderful men that ever lived. He was an idealist and that appealed to me because I have always been sort of a dreamer. I feel like his hopes and his prayers were all for the benefit of the country, and he just wasn't sure of the things that were going on outside the world because he felt that if he just ask them not to fight that they wouldn't.

SS: So you were a full supporter of President Wilson?

ES: I was a full supporter. Although he was on a different--he was different in politics, he was a Democrat, and I've always been a Republican.

SS: Did you vote for him even though he was a Democrat?

ES: I surely did! Twice.

SS: What did you feel towards Governor Alexander at this time?

ES: Well, I didn't have too much feeling about him. I really don't remember much about Alexander. I know that he did the best he could under the circumstances and that when our boys were called up, he lent every effort toward the helping the country in its situation of war. And I felt like that he did all he could because at no time, any man, neither Wilson nor Alexander nor Nixon for that matter runs the country alone--it takes a lot of people.

SS: So do you feel that he did the best he could?

ES: He did the best he could, I'm sure of that.

SS: How do you feel that Idaho was affected by this plunge into war?

ES: Well, it affected us greatly because Idaho was a young state at that time, and the people in the state were young and so the young men went out by the thousands from this, these little communities, and it really was a hard time for everyone. It seemed like the farmer boys felt like they were needed at home; but when there were two or three in a family, there was only one left at home to take care of the farm, and the others had to go.

SS: You mentioned earlier something about your husband being the chairman of the draft board. Would you like to explain this?

ES: Well, he was appointed chairman of the draft board. He had just been married, and at that time, they didn't draft married men especially if they had a family. But they expected them to serve in other ways to help the war along. And so he was appointed chairman of the draft board of Madison County, and he was chairman of the draft board from that time until World War II.

SS: Did you know anyone personally that was drafted that was real close to you or that really affected you in any way?

ES: Well, yes. There were boys that were in my Sunday School class and there were boys that were in the Mutual right around here in the Ward that were called. But fortunately one or two were wounded, but not any of them were fatally wounded.

SS: So none of your real close friends were ever returned?

ES: No.

SS: What was your husband's name?

ES: My husband's name was David William Stowell.

SS: Okay.

SS: You mentioned something earlier about a Merrill Baxter. Would you like to explain him?

ES: Well, he's a very close friend of the family, and he was drafted but not from Madison County. He was from Logan, Cache Valley. And he was called over with the first contingent that went to France; and after the war was over, he was sent to Siberia, so he came back feeling that nothing Idaho or Utah could throw at him in the way of winter would ever baffle him again.

SS: I see. What about the women's support duty back here?

ES: Well, the women in Madison County because we were so centrally located, were given the duty of taking over the Red Cross, and we were divided into wards and groups and we met at a certain central place here in Rexburg, and they sent us great boxes of material, and we rolled bandages for days and days--small bandages and wide ones for the base hospitals everywhere. And then they sent us wool in khaki colors, and we were supposed to knit sweaters and caps and scarves for the soldiers, and socks. And we knit hundreds of those, and I was quite an expert knitter in those days, because I had learned to knit from my mother, because the people in the old country were very anxious that their children should learn the arts, and so my mother taught us how to knit. And so I had charge of the knitting. Later on when the war was at its worse, we were shipped great quantities of white wool, and we knit what they called stump socks, and these were sad to do, because we knew that they were for the boys that had been injured in the war.

SS: Did the boys know that you were making these for them?

ES: Well, really not. But one member of our group pinned her name inside of one of the socks and she received an answer from this boy. He told her about how many months he had been in the hospital and how he appreciated this nice white, warm socks.

SS: That's really good. Did you feel real important and that your job was important?

ES: Well, it did in a way and still there was a sadness about it, because we felt like all this could have been avoided. Men with their fine abilities and the things they knew what to do, how we couldn't get along with each other and avoid all this terrible loss of life. Because after all that is the most precious thing we've got. And it seemed like they poured boys into France and then into England without any regard to the number that were sacrificed. And so far as we were concerned, there really wasn't anything that we were going to get out of it for ourselves. We were doing this for humanities sake.

SS: I see. How was the food supply during this time?

ES: Well, we never suffered for food because we were here in an agricultural district, but we were rationed on sugar, and on meat, and gas. And we were issued coupons or ration stamps, and we had to use them when we went to a store. We not only had to pay for the sugar, but we had to surrender some of our stamps. And I felt like we didn't suffer too much. I remember they asked us how many children we had and so they allotted us so much sugar, and in the fall when it came time for canning the fruits and vegetables, they allowed our family a hundred pound sack of sugar. So that we really didn't suffer. If we did, we really didn't realize it. We did do a lot of experimenting. I remember we had all kinds of breads that we made from different kinds of things, like soy beans flour, you know, and all whole wheat without using refined flour. And it changed our baking methods a little, but not too much.

SS: I see. Were there very many people hurt from this rationing off?

ES: Well, I don't think so. Some people were used to more, and they hurt. The ones that had a lot and were cut down because it's always easier to go up than it is to come back.

SS: During this time there were liberty bonds. Would you like to explain these?

ES: We ask, the school children were asked, each child was suppose to buy a liberty stamp every so often, as often as they could, at least once a week, and then these liberty stamps were put in a book; and when they had enough the bank gave them a liberty bond. And many of the children saved as much as four or five hundred dollars with buying this stamp, and of course, it went towards the war effort. But after that, after the war, then we were flushed with money and everything that we thought we just never would, and not only were we lost all we had, the children lost their liberty bonds, but that was long after the war.

SS: But you can remember this?

ES: I remember it, yes.

SS: On Armistice Day, can you remember this very well?

ES: I remember that very well, because it seemed to me like the war was getting worse and worse, and it just seemed like it would never end. Then suddenly one morning we were still lying in bed here, because the word came over at eleven o'clock on the Eastern coast; and all over the nation, they had the fire sirens and the school bells ringing. I think half the town was out in the streets with only a coat on over their night clothes. It was a happy time. People were so thrilled with it that we just didn't stop to think. They just loved each other and danced in the streets and were so thrilled to think that it was over. And we believed that Wilson said, "This was the war to end all wars," and that we would never fight again, and so we were really thrilled.

SS: And so this was really a happy day?

ES: It was a happy day. And I feel badly now to think that today they change it so that you don't even know whether it's Armistice Day or what. This year we've had two already.

SS: And we don't hear about them.

ES: No.

SS: How did you hear, when the war was going on, hear about it and what was happening--like did you have radios, newspapers, or just what?

ES: Oh, we had a daily paper then. And then we had a radio and that was a magic thing for us; because up until that time, telephone were scarce and a radio was really a miracle. But I remember we bought our first radio just before the war started in 1914.

SS: So you had a radio?

ES: Yes, we had a radio.

SS: I see. How big of a part do you feel that the United States played in World War I? How important do you think they were?

ES: Oh, I don't think that it ever would have ended. I think that the Kaiser would have taken over all of Europe, at least France and England, if it hadn't been for America that drove them back. But I think that Russia was just sitting on a fence, waiting to see what happened; and I think that if the United States hadn't gone in, Russia would have come.

SS: Now after World War I, there was a flu epidemic?

ES: It was during World War I. It started in 1918, and it was terrible. I remember hearing that in Rexburg we had as many as six and seven dying in one day. And my only brother died with the flu; and I remember my husband was down, and we had a family living in the basement. He was a professor at the college, and he and his wife and their

baby were down. You couldn't get a doctor. You couldn't get a nurse. I went for days without taking my clothes off only just to bath and change them, because nobody could help us. We just had to help each other as much as we could and look out for one another, so that it was really a trying time. I remember my sister at this time was living on a ranch up at Ora, and I called up to see how they were getting along, and the women that was living with her said that Annie was in bed terribly sick. She had the flu, and I said what about Robert. Call him, I want to talk to him. Oh, he is down too, and there they were way up there, snowed in and I was down here. I felt panicky. I wanted to tell her, you know, about my brother and how badly he had been afflicted. So then I called my sister in California, and she came. She and her husband, and she was here when my brother died. And the consensus of the opinion was that we wait until we got there. And It was such a mistake, because when we got there, she was so thrilled to see us and was so happy and then to have to chop her down like that. So I've always felt that if you have got bad news, tell it. Don't try and ease it because sooner or later, you've got to have the full force of the blow. So that was a hard time for everybody. I remember that people were so afraid of contaminating each other that they didn't have services in the church, funeral services. When my brother died, they had to plow out the snow all around the grave, and we all stood in the big drifts and had a short service there. It was just too bad.

SS: Oh, that's real sad. There were no doctors?

ES: Yes, there were doctors here, but they were worked to death. They were just worked to death. I remember when my husband took down, I was really panicky, because he had such a high fever that he was delirious, and I had four babies, and I just don't know what to do. I couldn't get help, and I called the doctor, and he said that there was nothing that he could do. He said just do what you can. So with faith and prayers and hope, we made it.

SS: That's really good. Do you feel that World War I had any effect on World War II?

ES: Oh yes, I do. I feel that the way they divided up the country and the reparations that were demanded, sowed the seed of hatred and disappointment. I think that Germany began right then and there to plan for another war. And I think that is why Hitler is--it was so easy for him to make his point and get such a following is because people were unhappy. And he promised them that they would have a superior race, and they would have a glorious kingdom, and nobody anywhere in the world would be subservient to them.

SS: Now in closing, what is your overall feeling of the war as a whole?

ES: You mean World War?

SS: One.

ES: Well, I just kept thinking it cannot be. Of course, when we were in it my husband sat for days and sometimes through the night deciding on these draftees that were called,

because it was always someone that we knew very well; and here at the draft board, they had to make up their minds who should call and then those boys then had to go for a physical. And then not until after their physical were they definitely called up. But it was a hard thing because often people on the outside didn't know the real circumstances in the home, a physical and financial, and some boys were exempt and others were called, and the people didn't know why "my boy should go and my neighbors didn't have to go" and often it was because of the physical necessity for the boy to stay home because he wasn't well enough to go. Or the parents and smaller children depended on his help. So it was a hard time for everybody and still all through the war I felt like that when it's over that will be the end of it, but if we read the Book of Mormon we would know better.

SS: We would like to thank you very much for your cooperation, and this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for future researchers.