

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Elwood K. Whitehead-The Depression

By Elwood K. Whitehead

April 7, 1975

Box 2 Folder 50

Oral Interview conducted by Larry Egely

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi August 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. I am Tina Whitehead. Today is April 7, 1975. The general topic will be the 1927 Depression.

Tina Whitehead: Mr. Whitehead, where were you born?

Elwood K. Whitehead: I was born in Twin Falls, Idaho. April 1, 1918.

TW: How long did you live in Twin Falls?

EW: For most of my life, at least until I was twenty, twenty-five years old.

TW: Where were your parents born?

EW: My father was born in Springfield, Utah; and my mother was born in Provo, Utah.

TW: Mr. Whitehead, what was your occupation during the depression?

EW: Well, I was about eight or nine years old when it started, so for the most part, my occupation was a student.

TW: How serious was it in your family and in your community?

EW: Well, I'd say that our family was affected less by the depression than most of those around us. But our community was definitely affected, as was the rest of the country.

TW: Mr. Whitehead, could you please tell us some of your memories and just sort of reminisce in your own words about the depression?

EW: Well, as far as my memories are concerned, they seem to be crowded with things such as five cents for a loaf of bread, and a bowl of soup and toast for a nickel, and the fact that everybody seemed to be out of work or a lot of folks were out of work at the time. I remember that we didn't feel in our home, we didn't feel that we were a disadvantaged family because my father had steady work during the depression, and in our home was located the only telephone for probably a matter of four or five blocks in each direction. Consequently whenever any kind of crisis or something like that would arise, the people would come to our place to use the telephone. My father was the senior foreman for Amalgamated Sugar Company and consequently was lucky enough to keep his job during the depression. And although his wages were cut drastically, we still had money enough to live on considering the fact that we kept a large garden and a cow and chickens, things like that.

My father was a Republican and consequently was a strong supporter of Mr. Franklin Delenor Roosevelt's policies, who was elected president following Mr. Hoover's administration. So we had a dim view in our family of the alphabetical bureaus that were voided on the communities or the country such as NRA and CCC, and WPA and things like that. Although I must be honest in admitting that some of these worked very well,

WPA accomplished much in various parts of the country, but in Twin Falls and Southern Idaho proper, there wasn't too much to show for this sort of boondoggling as my father called it. The CCC, Civilian Conservation Corp, was another matter. There were quite a few Eastern boys that were brought into the Southern Idaho area that worked in the forest building roads, and bridges, things like this, and I'm sure that it did a great deal of good for the boys themselves, and no doubt taken on a national scale did a great deal amount of good for the country too and the economy as a whole.

Our life was made up of such things as listening to President Roosevelt in his fireside chats telling us that we had nothing feat except but fear itself, which was true, and that we should all get on the bandwagon and help each other out and that's a good idea also.

It is a fact that I remember my childhood as being happier and less complicated than certainly the children who are living today are experiencing, because of the fact that everybody seemed to have financial problems, we were more understanding of each other and of each other's problems and we were more neighborly, we helped our neighbors constantly. Whenever we had extra game birds in the house or fish from a fishing trip or something like this, we always shared with our neighbors. And it was not unusual for someone to bring a pie or a cake, or a chicken or something like this along to our house to just be neighborly and share their good fortune.

I went to school in Twin Falls. The elementary school was called the Lincoln School and the thing I remembered most about that is that I had one of the few bicycles that the children attending that school had, and I was lucky enough, I guess, to be chosen as a between-school courier or errand boy, or messenger or whatever using by bicycle to carry messages between our Principal, Mrs. O'Leary, and the other schools around town. But I must admit that this good fortune came about only after I had experienced Mrs. O'Leary's brand of discipline. In her office she had an electric motor with a shaft containing four large rubber paddles and it was her habit to bring the unruly boys or girls into her office and back them up against these paddles and they'd get a good spanking. We all felt that Mrs. O'Leary was a real ogre.

Of course, one good thing about the schools of that time compared to our present day system is that everybody believed in the three R's and in phonics and it seemed that everybody was a good reader and a good speller. And one of the greatest things that happened in the elementary schools, at least, was the spelling bee that they would hold and I'm happy to state that I was fairly good at spelling all my life because of the competition that was engendered in the grades all through school.

I don't recall that we had a lunch program in the schools, but I do seem to remember that they had available milk in small pint bottles and chocolate milk. I don't think that we had any orange drink or anything else available to us. Consequently every student that didn't live close enough to the school to go home at lunch time brought his lunch in a school box or a paper bag or something and then augmented it with one of these bottled drinks if their parents could afford it.

It seems to me that money was no particular problem as far as the children was concerned. If we had a nickel a week we felt mighty fortunate. In most cases we went without things that seem so important today: candy bars, cola drinks, things like this were just not part of our lives.

I remember very well that my father would give me a few pennies once or twice a week and I'd go down to the corner grocery store which was about a block away from home, and buy penny licorice and limit myself to one of these a day, eating just a portion of it saving it so that it would last all day long.

I don't remember until after I was in high school ever having more than twenty-five cents at one time, that is, to spend foolishly on myself with candy or drinks or something like that. Since everybody else was in the same boat, so to speak, I didn't feel that I was being put upon or disadvantaged in any way.

As far as our clothing is concerned, we were always dressed clean. Mother insisted on that, but many of the students had extremely poor and shabby clothes that they wore to school, and patches were certainly not looked down upon at all. I know that I wore hand-me-downs from my older brothers and didn't feel badly about it and I'm sure that all the other children did the same thing.

Of course, we took part in all the school activities, PTA functions and things like this that folks do nowadays and parents always brought food to these school functions and everybody shared everyone else's contribution.

We could go to the shows usually on Saturday morning and stall all day for a dime. This was the day of the Cowboy Serial and our heroes were such people as Tom Mix and Duke Gibson and Buck Jones and so forth. There seemed to always be a serial that left us hanging in suspense so to speak, such as "The Perils of Pauline" and we would discuss these between Saturdays amongst ourselves and we defiantly identified with our heroes or heroines in the film presentations.

This also was the time when the theatres would try to spur their businesses by having give-aways and during the evening sessions when the adults were there, they gave away dishes, or china or things like this to help bring a bigger crowd into their theatre. And the master of ceremonies would stand on the stage of the theatre and usually he had a big drum and everybody had a ticket, a stub of which was in the drum and they made a big show of rolling the drum and having a pretty young girl come and pick the winning number. In fact, this idea became so prevalent that a great many people would never go to a show unless the prizes given away were particularly attractive to them.

And along about this time in our area, or community, radio was just coming into its own and there were a great many of us young fellows who built our own crystal sets. But we found our greatest enjoyment in grouping around the radio at night as a family listening to shows that are now past history. I remember with fond affections, such shows as the "Jello Program" with Jack Benny and Don Wilson and, of course, I think it was every

Monday and Tuesday night or maybe oftener that that each week we would eagerly await the sketch of Amos and Andy. There were many of us who tried to imitate their way of talking. Of course, nowadays a lot of folks don't even remember the fact that Amos and Andy were white men who were talking in black face, so to speak. Young fellows tried to imitate Kingfish and some of the other co-words that Andy had.

As we grew older we listened and grew up in the era of the big bands. And radio was definitely a very, very vital and important part of our lives, I would say that even more important to us than television is to the people of today. And I believe that radio helped us in the more constructive manner than television is to the folks of today, because we had to use our mental capacities to create and understand what was being told to us orally. The fact that these people were so successful in crating an atmosphere and making the spoken work and the sounds that we heard so appealing and so believable, each of us understood perfectly what they were attempting to demonstrate and to put across. Of course, the fact that radio was helping us keep abreast of the times and the things that were going on around the country, back East and across the world, also was extremely important. I can remember my father keeping all of us away from the radio while he listened to the news. One of his favorite newscasters, I think, was Mr. Kaltenborn.

Since my father was economically a step or two above his neighbors, they seemed to look up to him and want his opinions concerning the affairs of our community and our state and whether he was right or wrong, he didn't feel too kindly towards some of the things that were being done on a national scale. For example, he didn't blame Mr. Hoover for the depression and he didn't give Mr. Roosevelt all the credit for our country's picking itself up by its boot straps and getting over the depression.

Of course, although we were not personally affected to a great deal, at least in a serious manner by the depression in our home, we were fully aware of some of the suffering that was going on by Americans across the country.

We knew that there were a great many people who were full of misery and completely destitute. We knew that the factories were closing and that there were no jobs to be found anywhere, and our papers were full of the facts that there were apple sellers on the corners in the big cities trying to peddle apples and gain a few cents that way. We knew that there were farmers who were hurt by the drought that seemed to hit along about this time, it seems to me that I remember that this was the time of the dust bowl where Oklahoma and Kansas and, I think, Tennessee and some of those states back there were seriously affected by the extreme dry weather that lasted for three or four years. Arkansas too, because I remember that there was a class of people called the Okies or the Arkies, who put their way possessions into old ran shackled cars or trucks and tracked their way westward to California which they thought was the Promised Land. We seem to identify with these people because we knew that except for our extreme good fortune we too could have been in the same dire circumstances.

We saw pictures of people lined up in long bread lines waiting to get a cup of soup and maybe a piece of bread and our newspaper kept us up-to-date on this sort of thing along with the path news or newsreel in the shows that we saw. This too seems to have gone by the board because nowadays you never see a newsreel in the theatre. Since I guess television has taken over the dissemination of visual news. But back in those days, many of our ideas and understandings of what is going on around the world were given to us by the newsreel at the local theatre.

We saw graphic examples of abandoned farms back in the dust bowl area and of people coming westward trying to find work to buy food just to keep body and soul together. And when they arrived in California, they were forced to live in cardboard shacks and housing conditions that were just simply terrible. It got to the point where the name Arkie or Orkie seemed to be an epithet concerning people who were extremely down on their luck or even, I think, second class citizens, something along that nature. It's only natural that during such a situation that people would employ almost any means to forget their hard times and their problems. And so we had heroes in the paper such as "Dick Tracy" or even things like "Orphan Annie" and other comic strips that took our minds off our situations.

But again I must remind you that I personally didn't feel that I was disadvantaged because our lives were so filled with outdoor activities and games and things to do that we were just busy all of the time. We also had a lot of work to do. We had a big garden at home and since I was the youngest boy at home, I got more than my share of chores out in the garden. One of my daily chores was to milk our cow night and morning. And at one time I was milking six cows for some of the neighbors. This wouldn't of been so bad except that I had to walk to the pasture area which was about a half mile from home each morning and milk our cow and our neighbors cows and bring the milk home and distribute it to them. And then again in the evening, I picked up their pails and went and milked their cows and brought the milk back to them. I forget what I was paid for this, but it wasn't very much. The one thing I do remember clearly is that one of the neighbors didn't pay me and I took one of his pups, seeing that he had a mother dog who had some young bird dog pups and after telling my father about the fact that this fellow hadn't paid me for a long, long time, he interceded to the point that I got my choice of the litter of these pups. This was about the time that I read the story about The Three Musketeers, and I romantically named my dog Duke Dartanian after one of the musketeers. I was awkward and falling over my feet and clumsy this time of life and, of course, the pup was the same; so it was no stretch of the imagination which prompted my brothers and sisters to start calling me Duke, making fun of my name for the dog. I'm happy to state, however, that later on after about three years, my father worked with the dog and he turned out to be an excellent bird dog and he turned out to be an excellent bird dog and a joy to behold working in the field. He was an English Pointer and one of the best bird dogs that we never had or shot over.

It seems that along about this time that my memories may not be in chronological order but as I just think about them in looking back, it seems that about this time we were hearing a lot about people who had taken the law into their own hands, so to speak, and

had embarked on a spree of robbery and murder and such things. I remember fully well such people as Dillenger, and Pretty Boy Floyd, and Ma Barker and her sons, all of which kept the newspapers and the radio buzzing constantly with their exploits and their doings around the country. Of course, most of these people were brought to pay by the FBI and their leader. J. Edgar Hoover, who at the time was considered one of the greatest Americans living. I'm sure that anyone of my generation looks back upon him as being a good American and as one who did a great deal for his country. In light of the recent findings and things that are being said about the FBI, I don't know exactly how much of this was a true condition, but I do know that in those days Mr. Hoover was considered one of the top men in the entire country, second perhaps only to the President and some of the top Cabinet members.

Then to, about this time, was the terrible crime of the kidnapping of the Lindberg baby. Of course, Charles Lindberg was a hero to everyone because of his solo flight to Paris and he was the type of individual that most people could identify with in his private life, was extremely well thought of, and to have his son kidnapped by persons unknown, just shocked and hurt the conscious of the entire nation. I think it was a matter of six or eight weeks later that the kidnapper, Bruno Hauptman, was finally caught and, of course, the baby was dead. It seems to me that the Lindberg family paid a great ransom and eventually Hauptman was electrocuted.

Another person who was well thought of, and perhaps one of the most popular men in America at the time, was a fellow called Will Rogers. He's kind of a cowboy entertainer who worked pop radio and I think in some night clubs across the country, maybe in Potterville, I'm not sure about that, but I do know that his home spun philosophies and some of his cognate sayings were extremely popular, and he seemed to have a firm grasp of what was going on in the country and to cutting aside all of the thrills, things like this, and cutting directly to the bone in commenting on these things. I'm not sure if I remember correctly, but I think that Will Rogers died in a plane crash. And I've forgotten the name of the pilot, it could have been Willy Koats, but I'm not sure about that.

So in the background somewhere, I remembered about the banks closing. I think this was early 1930's, but the economic situations was such that the President and the governing people decided that the best way to stop the general panic in the country was to close the banks temporarily and let the economic structure more or less realign itself and get itself in order. Most of the people accepted this in good grace and left their money in the banks rather than causing an extreme rush to withdraw whatever savings they had.

I do remember that in Twin Falls, we had one bank out of all those that closed, that failed because of the run on the bank and we had another that in its subsequent advertising bragged about the fact that it never closed and that none of the depositors ever lost a cent. This bank has since been taken in by a big chain, has merged with a large chain of banks but it still is doing business in Twin Falls in southern Idaho.

Our home life was full and satisfying since mother and father were both LDS, we had a strict observance of the Sabbath day at our home. About the only thing that we could consider entertaining on Sunday, was the fact that mother would always have a big Sunday dinner and we usually would have home-made ice cream, once a week, on a Sunday and in the summertime we usually would have a watermelon on Sunday.