

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Emil Wilske-Experiences of the Depression

By Emil Wilske

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Box 2 Folder 54

Oral Interview conducted by Joyce Levi

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin March 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. I am Joyce Levi. Today is Nov. 28, 1974. I am going to interview Emil Wilske. The general topic will be The Depression.

JL: Mr. Wilske, where were you born?

EW: Born in Odessa, Washington.

JL: How long did you live in Odessa, Washington?

EW: Oh about three years.

JL: Where were your parents born?

EW: They were born in Southern Russia, a town of Plutsack, Russia.

JL: What was your occupation?

EW: My folks occupation? They were farmers.

JL: During the depression what are some of the things about the banks?

EW: They had a very difficult time during the banks. Most of the banks at that time didn't have a large or excess of money and people that put their money in were never guaranteed that they would be safe about it. And many of the banks went broke because so many of the people borrowed from these banks and then they could not pay the money back to the banks and the result was that many of the banks closed and people that have money in there they lost everything. There was no guarantee at that time like at the present time that guaranteed up to forty thousand dollars but at that time when the bank closed out, everyone lost him money in the banks and so the result was that banks all over the country were closing down and even people that had money in the banks were not able to get that, they lost all of that and the result was that no one had any money to buy anything, it's a total loss during the depression.

JL: Did you ever lose very much money in the banks?

EW: I didn't, but my father-in-law, he was Vice-President to the Banks. And they said if he would put his money in, they had about twenty-thousand dollars and that was all he had and they put it in the bank. And the result was the bank closed down and he lost all of that money. So he was wiped out completely. But many people around American Falls, where I grew up, did lose their money. Because the banks just, you would never know, morning you would get over there and the bank, the doors would be locked. And you couldn't get into it and after it was locked the receiver took over state and he would take control of the money. But most of the people never did get any of their money back.

JL: What about the Land Sales and Taxes, how did they....

EW: Now that's another thing, a lot of people wanted to sell out, but they couldn't sell out because no one had any money to make a down payment or anything on the land. But one thing had to be paid for and that is taxes. And when these people couldn't pay their taxes, why then they were foreclosed by County and the land was taken away to the back taxes that they had. And due to this many of the farmers and other people lost all their property and everything by sure sell. Because they couldn't pay their taxes. And that's another very big difficulty for people during the depression. And after they lost their farms and homes everything else they had no place to go. They couldn't raise any crop or make a living, 'cause their land that they did live on as they lived on they could raise crops and have a few animals and things around to guard those things. But after they lost the land why they had no place to go but into the bread line, which was organized by President Hoover at that time.

JL: Was land expensive at this time?

EW: Land was very cheap at that time. You could buy dry farm land; you could buy a good 160 acres for maybe \$5,000 from 2-5,000 dollars. Irrigators land was cheap at that time. When we came down here to Caldwell, the land back in Spokane had, they had three large sheets single spaced with farms advertised on that you could buy and they pay 20% down and you had 40 acres of buildings and everything on them--they were selling for about \$2,000. And 80 acres with good buildings on it, all improvements and everything, they were on sell for about \$4,000 (4-8,000 dollars). Farms today that sell for \$40-100,000 at that time were selling from \$2-4,000. And our brother-in-law in the Dakota's they bought much land back there at 50 cents an acre. Because this land was taken up by taxes and the result was they had surf sales and these lands were sold and for about 50 cents an acre at that time. And the taxes was one of the main causes of causing people to lose their farms during the depression.

JL: Did many people have jobs at this time?

EW: Very few jobs at that time. They had jobs, but they didn't have any pay. Everyone was looking for jobs, but they didn't have pay. Because I was working for a man and I got \$15 a month and we had to get up at five in the morning and work 'til about nine or ten at night. Which was about 50 cents a day. And we were thankful that we did have jobs at that time, because, it's a, that's the only source we had to buy any clothing or food or anything and so it is very difficult to make a living, at that time. And jobs were very short. I know a teacher, typical example: One teacher wanted to teach at American Falls for \$30 a month. Went to the School Board, another teacher came up about a week later and he said he would do the same job for \$20 a month. And didn't accept the one who was going to teach it for \$30 a month. That's the type of wages we got during the depression.

And far, by there are many things that where we heard the saying "Hoover Buggy". At that time they took cars, they--the engine break down they couldn't repair them and they, so they took the engines out and made these trailers, car trailers that they had and used. Hitched horses onto those and drive back and forth with horses instead of.

And we got that term “Hoover Buggy” at that particular time. Which today you seldom ever see anywhere, they are called the regular trailer, four wheeled trailer on cars.

But jobs were very difficult to get, and they, that’s about the time President Roosevelt introduced the WPA. This WPA he made it so that everyone could get a job. I think they were getting about \$30 a month. You could go out and they made up all kinds of jobs. I know my father lived along the creek and one of the projects there was to clean this creek out. To start at the headwaters of that creek and then they went right down this creek cleaning all the brush and trash and stuff out of that and clear down to about three miles down to the natatorium. And for that work they got \$30 a month, and that was the only source of income that they had. Otherwise jobs were hard to get. Then they did road work, different people, some of them built houses and public buildings like school buildings and so forth. And all of these things were done at the time of, they had the depression. But jobs were very scarce.

JL: Did any of the younger kids have jobs, after school or anything?

EW: Young people had hardly any jobs. I know of none that had any jobs. Unless, probably a store would need one, you know and ask them to do a few odd chores and so forth. They would probably get 15 or 20 cents to go to these stores. Young people today think when they get a gift of their folks--give them a dollar allowance or something to buy something at that time. I remember we went to town and we got 2 or 3 cents to spend on candy and stuff like that, and they--because people just didn’t have the money and they had big families and they had to feed them and some of the food that they had at that time.

I know of one big family that had nine children and they had a garden there, was about five acres, thier main source of food was just boiled potatoes and water gravy, and they had a couple of cows that they milked. From their milk and then the husband did get out and was able to earn a few dollars to buy flour so all they had was biscuits, potatoes and this water gravy and a little milk. That is the way the families were supported at that time. They used flour sacks to make skirts out of, dresses out of them and petticoats and so forth. And that’s the only source of material that they had to make their clothes.

JL: What about the groceries and their livestock?

EW: The groceries were very reasonable at that time. They, ‘cause no one had any money to buy them. Now butter would sell for about 10 cents a pound, hamburger was 3 pounds for a quarter, and bread was 5 cents a loaf. And you could buy it if you had the money. The trouble is that the money was not to be available. And the bad thing about it was when you wanted to sell anything you couldn’t get anything for it. Now the farmers they store trade in just about--my folks traded materials in for groceries. Mother would make butter and she would trade it in there. Well, I said butter was only about 10 cents a pound. And if you wanted to sell any beef or any pork you couldn’t get anything out of it because pigs at that time just weren’t selling. People weren’t buying them because they didn’t have any money to buy them. So the farmers just had to exchange.

I know of a case where I traded a sow of eight young pigs in for one that was fat enough to butcher because we didn’t have enough money to pay for wheat to fatten these

pigs or have the food there. Even \$3, wheat was 25 cents a bushel. And another illustration I have is a neighbor one time had two hogs and he didn't know what to do with them so he invited my brothers over and said if they would help him butcher these hogs that he would give them two hogs just to help him butcher those ten hogs he had over there. Because there was no sale and they just had to get rid of the meat someway or another. And the same thing with beef, if anyone butchered beef they couldn't sell the beef so these farmers would exchange, they would give them to the neighboring farmers to get rid of the meat, because they didn't have the feed to feed these animals. And deer poaching at this time was very heavy. 'Cause the people that didn't have any money to buy meat from that source. So these are the difficulties that they did have.

And clothing was very difficult. Now in those days any type of clothing was used no matter how old it looked. Patches were an honor at that time, people, because when clothes were torn they couldn't go in and buy new clothes; they just had to patch clothes that they had. A typical example of that is: My folks bought to keep us in shoes, why they would go out and buy at these auction sales just a large bunch of shoes on the other foot. But it was enough to keep our feet covered. And during the summer hardly anyone around there ever wore shoes as soon as the frost was gone, why the young people would go barefooted. And they went barefooted all summer long until fall, when it got too cold. Then we finally had to go back to our shoes again. But that was one way of getting through the depression that we had at that particular time.

JL: During the depression did many people travel?

EW: That was one thing that people didn't do at that time. Most of them stayed home. And because they had no money to buy gas for the cars, of course, that was a time that cars were not as many as we have at the present time. And most of them were traveling by horse and buggy. And they did travel, the only way they would go and visit the neighbor around there. But to take a trip like from American Falls to Pocatello which is about 25 miles, that probably once a year the people went that far. Or any trip of any distance like that. Because they just didn't have the money to go on those trips. And the only reason they would take those trips, they would save all their money during the summer time and then in the fall they would go to Pocatello because they thought they would get a much better buy up there with the little money that they did have. But as far as traveling like taking trip to countries, other towns and places like that that was out at that time. Their source of entertainment was visiting the neighbors. Although in some cases the neighbors lived as high as 50 miles away. They would go over there on Saturday's then come back Sunday, making it a two day trip. They usually stay over night over there. And another source of entertainment they had at that time was that young people would get together and they maybe, four or five, and they would go to the one's neighbors place and stay there over night and have the food to live there. And then the next day why they would come back again. But as far as horseback riding and with team and buggy was about the only source of travel that they had. Very few cars that are in shape that they could go very far. Because tires and everything were too expensive, gas was too expensive and people just didn't have the money to do it.

JL: The housing at this time, what was it like?

EW: Well, the houses were in very poor condition at this particular time. Just any kind of a shack or anything that you could get into and that's where people made their home and the heating at that time, the only source they use to go down to the mountains cut down quaking asp and pine trees and willow trees. Any type of wood that they could have and they would be in these homes cold wind would blow through the doors, windows, cracks. And so it's awfully hard to keep that out. And what people did they lived in these houses and they had these wood burning stoves, big heaters and as soon as they were all in bed, why the fire went out; and the result is that by morning many times that the water buckets were just froze solid. And everything in the inside of the house were frozen. And then they would have to get up and light the fires and warm it up. But the crack were all over the houses. There was nothing there to keep people warm. And this is a particular time when so many people died with pneumonia, they would get pneumonia and there was no way to protect these people they couldn't afford to take them to the hospital, so most of the people tried to take care of them in their homes and the very common thing at that time to cure pneumonia was mustard plasters. They make mustard plasters mix, and put it on the chest of people. And with that they were suppose to cure themselves. But they didn't have any of these modern antibiotics like they give them today to cure and the result is that when you get pneumonia in those days it was almost fatal, very few people have ever recovered from pneumonia. Because of the bad conditions of the homes any shack that anyone can move in because people couldn't afford to pay rent. They pay \$5 or maybe \$10 a month, that's all they could afford for those. And they even then, if they couldn't afford that \$5 or \$10 a month well the landlord would make them move out. They had no recourse in those days to go back to law like they have today. But you can't make people move out if they can't pay the rent, the government protects them. But in those days you had to move from one place to another. And your clothing on your back was the only, and the coal wood burning stoves were the only thing that kept you warm. But the housing was very bad. And very few people had, had good homes to live in.

JL: Okay, you were talking about the medical conditions. What about the hospitals, what were they like?

EW: The hospitals were average at that time. They didn't have these modern facilities which we have now. About the only thing at that time, you went to the hospitals; it's a place to keep warm, food to eat. But as far as medical facilities, there were very limited at that time. They did have x-rays, they could take x-rays, but medication was mostly just these polenesses that they put on these people and the common salves and things that they had at that. Which today is very seldom used. Now these antibiotics and things like that they can doctor people and get them out of those predicaments, but at that time they didn't have that. And they did perform such operations as predicator and other gall bladder operations and common operations like that. But even then, as far as antibodies when they had infection or anything like that in people, they were very limited and a great many people died from a failure of having antibiotics to check you. Especially one of the fatal cases at that time was if you had ruptured appendixes, it was usually something that you couldn't shake and people died from that, which today many of the

cases today are saved by these modern antibiotics that they have. And hospital care they were clean, they had facilities that good beds, good nursing services, and food but the preventiveness like these modern antibiotics was almost unknown at that particular time.

JL: Was there a lot of stealing in stores or anything at this time?

EW: Well, just like anytime when people are desperate. People have to live and that was no different then it is today. But in those days they didn't have the money to buy for this and people have to have food, so there was much food snitching and things like that in the grocery stores. When people went in there to get food. One typical example of where much stealing is going on: The trains as they pass through American Falls, they would slow down, people in town didn't have any money to buy coal or anything so many of these people would get up on these coal cars and start a heaving the coal off on the right away. As the train went through American Falls and then they would get off and after the train had gone, why they would get their buggies and go out there with sacks and things like that and pick up this coal. And that was one way of getting fuel for the homes to burn. And if there was anything around that they could steal, why they would steal it because it was just a case of necessity, they had nothing else to do it or get their food. And they had to live, they did a lot of fishing along the river. In those days they ate a lot of those trash fish that we wouldn't eat today like carp, suckers and chugs and things like that, but that was very tasteful at that time. Because that was the only way they could get their food. So anytime, it was not that the people were more dishonest, but it was due to desperation. They had to live. And that was one reason so much of the stealing was on at that particular time. They would also steal cattle. Boy, out in the country they would steal calves, butcher calves and cows or any source of food that they could get to pick-up. And so it's very hard not to be dishonest to people, but it's just a case of having to survive.

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