

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Dr. Evelyn Thirkill- The Depression in Idaho

By Dr. Evelyn Thirkill

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Oral Interview conducted by Laurie Francis

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin February 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. I am Laurie Francis. Today, March 22, 1975, I'm going to interview Dr. Evelyn Thirkill. The general topic will be the Depression in Idaho.

LF: Dr. Thirkill, where were you born?

ET: I was born in Paris, Bear Lake County, Idaho.

LF: How long did you live in Paris?

ET: Oh, I lived there until I went to summer school at Ricks College in 1924.

LF: Where were your parents born?

ET: My parents were born in the Bear Valley area. My mother was born in Round Valley, Utah, which is not far distant from the southern end of Bear Lake. My father was born at Paris.

LF: How long did you attend Ricks College?

ET: Well, I got my Bachelor's degree from Ricks College, but I went continuously for four summers. And then later, I went back to Ricks College, took courses and also taught courses in the summers of 1953 and 1954.

LF: What did you teach?

ET: I taught one class with Dr. Hugh Bennion in Conservation, I taught a course from the Idaho Curriculum Guide for Language Arts, Curriculum Development; two courses.

LF: When you received your Bachelor's Degree, what area was it in?

ET: It was Elementary Education with a minor in Psychology. And I graduated with high honors after all those years of just keeping at it a little bit at a time.

LF: What year were you married in?

ET: I was married in 1926 in the Logan Temple.

LF: What was your first home like, that you moved into?

ET: My husband, Howard, was a rancher, and we went to live in a ranch house on the farm where he was a partner with Mr. Ed Whitman from Soda Springs. This farm was out in the Eight Mile Valley, beyond Soda Springs, but in Bear Lake County. The home was a three room home with a basement without a floor. It had a dirt floor, and no cement in it, and no opening from upstairs, but an outside entrance to the basement area. We went there with very little furniture and very little to do with. We did have a good old cook stove, that we had to use coal or wood, and at that time we used mostly wood,

having to gather chips to light the fire and Howard brought wood from the canyon every year to saw into pieces or chop so that we could have wood for the fire. After a few years we were able to buy coal and haul it out there for the winter use. Sometimes it would get up to 100 degrees in the kitchen in the summer time. I cooked for hay men, and lambing men and harvest men every year for seventeen years out there on the ranch. But the kind of furniture we had and the mother had given us that we could extend large enough to seat the hired men and our own little family. We bought one little table that we used in the living room that was sort of like a decorative table in front of a window. Howard bought three nice pictures when we were married. This was the extent of the kind of furniture we were able and the amount of furniture we bought. We had a brass bed and when people came to visit us they had to...we spread blankets on the floor and everybody slept on the floor except those who were lucky enough to get the bed. We used to always say to the young people and the youngsters that came, that we'd find a place even if we had to hang them on a nail. So most of our furniture, other than those things I've mentioned we could put dish towels and extra things or clothing in dividing shelf of the orange crates because they were divided into two sections--made that way, so it made two, really two shelves within each orange crate. We had a shelf in the bedroom that I put a curtain around where we hung our clothes. There was a building covered in the kitchen which provided a place for the dishes and kettles and things of that kind.

LF: How often did you get to town?

ET: Oh, quite often because we had so many men working there all the time that it seemed we had to go at least once a week to buy groceries and to keep up with our need on the ranch. It seemed like we had people in...we had sheep on the ranch and had all the sheep reserve even up onto Mt. Sherman and so it, I guess went for many years that we were never alone. We always had somebody there that I had to cook for and fix lunches for. I was also teaching school part of the time or winters there.

LF: How did you get to school and to town? Did you walk?

ET: We had horses, and in the summer time when we were first married we went in a little buggy, but in the winter time we went in a sleigh, a covered sleigh. When it was so very cold, the coldest part of the winter, we would always have a little stove set up in the sleigh. With the pipe going out of the top of the covered, through the canvas, to give vent to the smoke. Even when our babies were small, we'd wrap them up and bundle them up and we'd all pile into that covered sleigh and go to town. Sometimes taking friends with us, so that we could make one trip serve for two families.

LF: You mentioned that you raised sheep on your ranch, could you tell us a little bit about that?

ET: Sheep raising during the early depression was a pretty unsatisfactory enterprise, because the value of the sheep went down to practically nothing. In fact, it became so bad that some sheep men were killing their sheep and burying them up on the hills above the ranch there. My husband and his partner did not agree with this philosophy, but

managed to keep care of the sheep and the stock that we had. But others plowed them under in order to help raise the price of food or to perhaps make feeding stock less expensive.

LF: What were the prices like back then on food and clothing?

ET: I can't recall exact items, but they certainly weren't very much because all the money that my husband was able to earn on the ranch was eighty dollars a month. When I was teaching, I was earning a hundred dollars so we had to buy everything we needed in terms of food, and clothing, extra items, from that amount. We felt like we were better off than many people because we were both working. One reason we were better off is that we were able to raise so much of our own food, we always had a garden every summer, we had meat raised there on the ranch, we had chickens, which provided eggs. We had to buy flour, all the extra items and things that you'd prepare your daily meals with and clothing, those kinds of things. And I know that when we'd go to town, we'd take a can of cream to town. We had milk cows, so I'd sometimes take the cream to town and we'd get enough money to buy all the groceries we needed and we could bring enough groceries back for a week for about five dollars, which is quite different than the amount of food you can buy now for five dollars.

LF: It sure is. What types of things did you do for entertainment?

ET: Well, we participated in the entertainment around in the valley; church activities and social dances, home parties where groups would get together. We always took our children with us, we had two little girls; Mary Lou, and Jean. We always took them with us because we had no one to baby sit and it just was not done, everybody took their children. Even if we went to a dance we took the children and made little beds for them around on the--and when they had the dances in the school house, and we'd push the desks back by the wall and then lay our--take a blanket our coats and make places for the children to sleep. So then in the summer times when we had an opportunity to have some entertainment, we'd go fishing or camping or out for a picnic some evening. Or even some interesting things that I used to do would be to cook the meal for the hired men and take it down in the meadow where the hay men could eat their meal under the trees and take the children along too. In the winter time, we skied and skated and took the children with us. We also--they had sleds, and would ride behind the horse drawn sleighs on their own sleds or on skis. And all of these things, always being able to be with us whenever we went anywhere, caused my children to feel like they had the best childhood that any children could ever have, because it was so interesting and so much fun to always be able to go together.

LF: Did you ever go to the movies?

ET: Yes, we went to the movies, when there was a good movie that we felt the children would enjoy, we'd go in town to the movies and come back in the night in the sleigh or... Like in about 1928 we bought a car. And so while the roads were good in the summer time, we could use the car. But the snowplows couldn't get out there, nor was there

gravel on the roads. So sometimes we even got stuck clear up to the running boards in the muddy roads. So it wasn't very useful, only in dry weather. So we used sleighs and horses for the muddy weather and for the snow roads.

LF: What kind of car did you buy?

ET: We bought a beautiful little blue car called a Whippet, that we thought was just about the height of perfection. I'm not even sure which company made it, built the Whippets, but I have never seen one since that time. That was one of the early cars, and then later we had a Chevrolet.

LF: How much did you pay for that Whippet?

ET: Oh, I think we bought it new and I think it was about eight hundred dollars. We felt very prosperous in that we were able to afford that Whippet.

LF: Did you ever have an occasion to have to borrow money during the Depression?

ET: There were times when we wanted to borrow money, but this was almost an impossibility. And I recall one time when my husband had an opportunity to buy some extra farm land. There were several hundred acres available in just adjoining the land we were farming at that time. All he needed was three thousand and fifty dollars to buy this three hundred and fifty acres of land and he was not able to borrow it, there was just no money available that people would—no matter—he tried many, many places and there was no money available for that kind of enterprise. Even at that time my school checks were discounted, banks would take the teachers checks, but they always at a discount, which in effect, meant that they were loaning money to the districts (School Districts) but charging the teachers the interest in order to cash the check.

LF: How often did you get a check?

ET: Well, the first year I taught school, I taught seven months so I had seven checks and then later it was nine months terms, so I would get a check for nine months. But while my babies were small, then I would stay out a year or so and then go back to teaching again, so I didn't teach in a consecutive series of years through those days.

LF: Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like to teach school and what the schools were like back then?

ET: Well at that time, when I started teaching school, in the fall of 1924, I went into a new school house there at Eight Mile. The school, the old school had previously burned and the district had built a new one-room school. I had twelve children and about five grades that year; the grades were all the way from one through eight. The next year I had twenty-two children and seven grades. So in this way I was able to do a great deal of what they now call individualization, because our cross-age tutoring, because older children could help younger children and some children were able to learn fast enough to

move an extra grade through the period of two or three years. Because it was a sort of continuous progress type of thing. Older children would be able to help the younger children learn faster and the younger children would learn more from listening to the older classes too. It was one of the most delightful experiences I had, I really enjoyed teaching school. I recall that the first year that I taught there, I enjoyed it so much and was so pleased with the children, that, I guess I was somewhat of a child myself, because we'd get to laughing about something that happened, and in order to keep the children from getting out of hand I'd have to run outside and quit so that I could get sober and come back and talk to them without laughing. But we enjoyed it so much that everybody got along well, it was a really great experience. I taught through a period of several years. I taught seven years there, through--between 1924 and 1941.

LF: Did you teach your daughters there?

ET: I taught my oldest daughter there and through the years when she was in the first through fourth grade, but through three years, she made four years progress. Then when my next daughter was born I stayed home with her, so I didn't teach through those years. When I started to teach again, then I taught in Soda Springs, the sixth grade in 1942.

LF: What was your clothing like back then? Did you have new clothing, every year the way most of us do now?

ET: Well, as I recall I don't think we worried a lot about much clothing. If we had one good dress that we could dress up to go to church in we felt pretty fortunate. So we kept our Sunday dress clean and very special to go to church in, but other than that we wore very plain, cheap kinds of clothing.

LF: Did you make your own clothing?

ET: Yes, I seldom ever was able through those years to buy anything ready-made. I made dresses over into clothing for my daughters, and even coats, and even aprons. Anything that anytime I could find a larger dress that no one was wearing, I'd cut it down and make it into what at that time seemed a delightful beautiful little dress for my daughters.

LF: What was it like to travel in the cars that you had back then?

ET: Well, the roads were narrow and rough and most of them unsurfaced. If we had any surface at all it might be rough gravel, but there were no heaters in the cars and windows were--in the first cars we had, they were sort of an izing glass (celluloid), little curtain affair that you could put up around the car for protection. Then you'd take them down in the warm weather and the wind would blow through like an open car. And I can recall driving from so many times from Soda Springs or from the ranch to Paris and taking my oldest daughter while she was a baby with us, and wrapping her up in a good heavy warm blanket and quilt over the front of the car because it was so cold, so that the water wouldn't freeze in the engine as we drove. And on our way up to Paris we had to cross a

big fill over a sort of a canyon, there were low railings on each side. But the wind was blowing hard, and as we went across this bridge like overpass, the wind whipped that quilt up over the windshield. And Howard was able to get the car stopped in time and there we got the quilt down and we were right on the bank of this precipice.

LF: What kind of mileage did you get?

ET: We didn't worry much about mileage I guess at that time because gasoline was cheap and cars didn't go very fast. We didn't even have dimmer lights, we couldn't dim the lights and we'd almost go blind in our effort to keep from--out of the way of an oncoming car. You'd go so cautiously because you couldn't dim the lights and the lights of the oncoming car would shine right in your eyes. So driving was a difficult thing. It was more dangerous I'd say, than it is today, even. But from the standpoint of the efficiency of the cars, but from the standpoint of fewer cars it was probably much safer.

LF: How fast did these cars go?

ET: Oh, 30 miles an hour was a good speed that you felt like you were really moving along, if you could go 30 miles.

LF: About how many people could you seat in one?

ET: Oh, maybe five, you could crowd in five people. That is in a two seated car.

LF: Could you tell me a little bit about the Civilian Conservation Work Program in Idaho?

ET: This program was set up under President Roosevelt, FDR, in order to provide work for young men who had the need because of lack of other jobs available, the unemployment rate was very high. Young men who were eligible, I suppose sixteen, eighteen, I forget what age they let them enroll in, but they enrolled in programs where they worked with foresters care for the trees and building dams and things for the government. One of my brothers worked in this program for awhile and a cousin whom my mother raised worked in the program, and was in the forest up above Boise when in this work, when he was stricken with appendicitis and died. But this program did provide great help to the unemployed, but it was mostly young men who were enrolled as I remember.

LF: What types of things did they do in the forests?

ET: Well, they were building roads and helping build dams and helping care for the insect infested forest program.

LF: How long did this continue? Did it end in the thirties, or did it keep going?

ET: I think it was just mostly through the thirties, I don't recall that it continued beyond and into the forties. It may have done in some area, but I'm not sure.

LF: Did it pay them, or did it just provide them with food and work?

ET: I think they were able to draw some money from it, besides their food and lodging. One thing I remember about it, that so many of the young people that--young men that went to work in this program were really not motivated to be very energetic. And I remember that there were jokes passed around about the fellows leaning on their shovels and other kinds of jokes made about their lack of interest and motivation and just using up their time rather than getting the work done. But it did provide a lot of incentive in ways of finding something for people to do and increased the morale of people at that time when there was so much need.

LF: You mentioned earlier that you attended Ricks College in the twenties. Could you tell us a little something about college life during the Depression?

ET: When I went to Ricks College there were only two buildings there. The two old stone buildings that are now on the Ricks College campus. It was very interesting for me, because my trip to Ricks College, the first time I went there after I'd taken the exams which made me eligible to get into Ricks College right out of high school, was the farthest distance I'd ever been from home, from Paris. So it was really quite a trip for me to go from Paris to Rexburg. I enjoyed summer school there at Ricks College. Particularly the swimming program. I had--probably that was the most enjoyable sport and fun thing that I did, was to swim in their funny little old swimming pool that had beetles and all kinds of bugs in the water. But they didn't have ways to keep it clean and really provide a good pool. It was a very small one, but it was fun for those of us who had time and opportunity to swim. Also the assemblies and the field trips in the Conservation programs were fun. But I lived with three other girls in an apartment we rented. So we spent most of—a lot of our time carrying groceries from the store back to the apartment to cook, and we took turns cooking. So this was one of our biggest chores, but also kind of a fun thing, because all young people like to eat and we were always cooking up something that was good to eat. Then we'd have to find a place to study and we only had a little kitchen and a bedroom. And in the bedroom were two double beds and we had to study there. So four of us trying to study and it was an upstairs apartment and very, very warm in the summer. So we had a difficult time being comfortable while we studied so I'm surprised we learned enough to pass grades and get through our programs.

LF: What was tuition for the summer?

ET: I don't even remember it, I guess, well, I know this about--that I could tell you about the expense, and this is about all I can remember in detail. Was that in order to go to summer school, my father helped me borrow money at the bank and signed a note for me for \$150.00, for me to go to summer school. Then when I started teaching that fall, I paid

him back--or I paid the bank by the month to pay the \$150.00. I had borrowed to go to summer school and saved enough to go back to summer school the next summer.

LF: Were there quite a number of students who attended college during the summer?

ET: The summer school was the big program then, because the state was offering certification to teachers on summer school programs. So the first summer I was able to get what they called a third grade certificate, which meant it was--I was eligible to teach or certificated to teach for one year. Then I had to go back and get a second grade certificate which made me eligible to teach for two years. The following summer I went to summer school again and earned a first grade certificate which was good for three years. After that I had to get--after I earned a permanent first grade certificate with five years experience teaching. This permanent first grade certificate is still valid in Idaho and in order to keep that certificate valid I've had to either teach or take some courses to keep the certificate valid every five years. It's one of the certificates that was not outlawed when new state laws on certification were implemented. This certificate is still good, even though I've earned many certificates since then, in Elementary Education, in Administration, in School Psychology, and even gotten my doctorate. The certificate is still my--one of my proudest possessions.

LF: The stock market crashed in 1929, but do you feel the depression started before that in Idaho?

ET: Well, I think I grew up realizing that things were really worse as far as the farm people and the residents of Idaho were concerned who lived on farms and gained their employment through farming. Because through all the days of my early life we had lived on a farm, and farmers were just not prosperous. There was very little, and I'd grown up with very little. So when the crash of the stock market came in 1929, it didn't seem to make a lot of difference to us, because we had our food from the farm. But we were not used to having a lot of money and we didn't feel any more deprived perhaps, than we had felt before. We were just not used to many things. But we got along with what we had and made the best of it. I think one of the reasons that it didn't seem so traumatic to me is because none of the people I knew around me had much more than we had. So the only things that I can recall that were really difficult to take, was the fact that we couldn't borrow money to buy more property, nor to extend--or raise our standard of living, until perhaps in the forties or even later.

LF: What was the economic situation like around where you lived? Did you find that there were many stores that had to close, or did you have food stamps?

ET: I don't even remember food stamps at that time. I do remember them when I was just a little child at the--during the first World War. But I don't remember that we used food stamps in the second World War, there just was not much available and you didn't expect to buy much, so we weren't--we did not feel too deprived. I think it was because our whole life history had been one of frugal living.

LF: Did you feel that the government was handling the situation to their potential?

ET: Well, I remember the campaign of 1932, when President Roosevelt was elected, and what a traumatic time it was for all politicians and for people who were really involved in it. Because this was the first one I remember that seemed like every one was concerned about. The Republican party had been in power for many years and the Democrats were blaming President Hoover. President Roosevelt came up with big plans to help relieve the unemployment and to save the banks from going broke. Because after the crash of 1929, banks went broke all over the country and they finally were able to set up some new banking laws which were able to--they began to get federal money to support the banks. Gradually the situation became better, from the financial standpoint and therefore the economic situation became better because of the CCC program and more people being able to get a little money to live on.

LF: Did you feel that the state or local government added to or created more problems during the Depression? Did they come up with any programs to relieve the unemployment locally?

ET: I think the state programs were very minimal. Most of the people seemed to look to the Federal government for some relief from the situation rather than look to their own local ability to provide things for people.

LF: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

ET: I guess one thing I should add is that the people who really suffered most from the depression were people who had contracted large debts in the way of land purchases, homes, investments in banks and savings, stock certificates and so on, were all wiped out, because of the crash of 1929; stock market. I remember that people who had contracted to buy large tracts of land, or had bought homes, and they were unable to pay their debts, they were the people who were really hurt in our area, because as I recall, when we'd drive out of north of Soda, out into the farmlands there were many farms left vacant and homes--new farm homes that had been built when the land was first left vacant and was growing back to weeds because the farmers had had to leave their land and turn it back to the government or to whomsoever they'd bought it from, so these were the kinds of people and the cause of so much suffering and problems during the depression days.

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