

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Farrell Rock- The Depression in Idaho

By Farrell Rock

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Oral Interview conducted by Karen McPheeters

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This is an oral history. I am Karen McPheeters. Today is the fourth of December, 1974. I am going to interview Mr. Farrell Rock. The general topic will be The Depression Years.

KM: Mr. Rock where were you born?

FR: Rexburg, Idaho 1911.

KP: How long have you lived here?

FR: All my life.

KP: Where were your parents born?

FR: Both mother and dad were born in Utah. Dad at Morgan, Utah and mother at Heber City.

KP: How did they come up here?

FR: They came up with the first settlers, to the valley. Dad came up about 1900. Met here and were married soon after.

KP: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

FR: Three brothers and one sister.

KP: Are they all living in this area now?

FR: One brother has passed away, my sister is living in Salt Lake and my two brothers are here.

KP: What we are going to talk about today is the depression. Can you remember when it first started and the stock market fell? Can you remember how you felt about that?

FR: Well, I was a young man at that time about 18 and it wasn't too frightening. The crash came in 1929 and President Hoover was president at that time. He was blamed for the depression, but it wasn't his fault. There was nothing he could have done to stop it.

The thing I think drew him the most criticism, is he didn't do anything to relieve the problems of hunger and no jobs and poverty at that time. So it was called referring to him as his depression. And the days were referred to as the days of Hoover and the modes of travel from the cars to horse and that were called Hoover buggy's and things of this sort.

KP: Were there a lot of bad feelings about him or...

FR: Not really. Not really because they blamed him for the time, but there was no riots or things like this they were almost unheard of in those days.

KP: You know it seems that since it was so far away the stock market and everything that actual falling of the stock market would have an effect. The people here, did they really think about the stock market--the money situation?

FR: Well, it had a very quick in-direct bearing on the whole country because the stock brokers couldn't believe it was going to happen and tried to stave it off by putting their savings and money into it, kept buying stock and there was no chance for a change, it just kept plunging down. There was no markets for anything at that time and so the millionaires of that day, many lost their total fortunes nearly all. Some even took their lives because they had never been used to anything but wealth. They didn't dare face their families and the future without it. Some jumped from windows, others shot themselves. These things happened.

Then it had a reaction on all the banks in the area, on the whole country. Because the people would hear about these things and would go to the banks and draw their money out. If a bank had loaned more than it could afford to pay back at such sudden notice, it would force them into closure. Now, at that time we didn't have a Federal Reserve System with other banks rushing to their aid and helping to protect them. So, as a consequence, why as soon as the bank had failed and another one in the area then the people would panic and they'd rush in to draw out their savings and this forced banks by the thousands to go bankrupt and broke in just a few weeks.

KP: Was there a bank in Rexburg?

FR: Yes.

KP: Did it close?

FR: There was three banks in Rexburg, two, in Farmers' Merchant, I believe it was called and the other...well, I've forgotten the name of the other one. The one was in the building where the present Madison co-op is located and the other one was across the street where the Valley Bank is at the present time in the old building. Then the State Bank which eventually became the First Security, was in the old building where the Mode-O-Day is located, and it survived. There was a bank in Sugar City and it went broke, just because of these runs. Now, I don't know the real reason why the State Bank survived unless it just had such a tight reputation that it didn't loan any money.

KP: That could have been it. How did your family feel about this?

FR: Now I wasn't married at the time, and my parents took it quite well instead and because they lost money in the banks, dad lost his savings. But we lived on the small farms in the area and were more or less totally dependant. We could go back to it much more easily then we could at the present time.

Every farm had some pigs and dairy cattle and beef cattle. This was generally true. Chickens...had their own chickens, made their butter, there was no such thing as creamery butter at that time. Mother would churn, we would churn the butter and she would mold it and put it into the little packets and sell it at the stores. So we had the butter, we had the milk, we had the eggs from the chickens, we had pork and beef from the cattle and we were self-supporting. We couldn't...no one hardly bought flour they take their wheat to the mill, it was called grist, and leave wheat you got so much flour back. You didn't have to take it all out. And you could go and get your flour from the mill, so we had our flour and meat with vegetables from the garden and canning and this. Farmers, themselves did quite well.

KP: I'd imagine it would be a lot easier for the farmers; they wouldn't spend as much money, except for things like clothes and shoes?

FR: This is true. Now if with the purchase of things--butter was about 10 cents a pound. Wheat about 25 cents a bushel, but you could hardly sell those items. So the flour was taken back as grist rather than bought. You could have bought the best dairy cow in Idaho for \$25 but nobody had the \$25.

KP: I was wondering if it was more of a barter system than in was a monetary system.

FR: In a way. Now, dances at that time, some of them, some of the orchestras came live orchestras, of course, it all was at that time. They would come and play and people would bring produce in some cases.

KP: For the fees?

FR: Not always, but a dance 25 cents a ticket. In some cases they played for produce.

KP: That would be kind of fun. Since we're nearing Christmas and just had Thanksgiving, what do you remember about the holidays during the depression?

FR: Well, in those days Christmas wasn't commercialized like it is today. Santa Claus was around and I don't ever remember not having a Christmas. It wasn't the big lavish things that we do today, but there were toys for the small ones and maybe a pair of gloves, a few little essentials like this instead of complete outfits and that, but it was fun it was joyous; in fact, I don't have any real hang-ups on the depression being so bad.

People could visit, they had time for everything, there was no jobs--not really, very little work. That didn't mean people weren't busy. But, they had to go and get their own wood out, couldn't afford to buy coal, and things like this. Their winters were tied up gather fuel, your summers on the farm and the stores stayed open. There was an exchange of produce from the farm buying back.

KP: Did you ever leave home during this time to find a job during this time?

FR: Yes, I started out teaching school (1931) \$65 a month and I was given instead of a check we were given a warrant and we couldn't cash it, but it was redeemable if you kept it long enough. It drew 7% interest which wasn't bad. If you could afford to keep it. That was good interest for those times.

Now there were two fellows in the valley that would buy these warrants, Daniel Ricks ran a Real Estate Office, and he was on Main Street and he had a trust fund for some children and he would buy them. George Huskinson, lived up here at Moody, he would buy (he must have been a real wealthy man for those times) he would buy any amount that you took to him, but in addition to the 7% that the bank was drawing, they'd discount them 10%. So you were really the loser, cash them in and, of course, I cashed quite a few and glad to get the money, at the time. They made some real profits on having the money and still it was a good thing for those that needed to get the cash.

KP: Someone was talking about the warrants.

FR: This, of course, going back to your question. In the summertime I would travel all over the country. Hobo's they called them. The trains were going East and West and all over and I'd spend my summer months traveling around, looking for work, of course, but there wasn't any. There were literally thousands and here I found out where the hardships of the depression really struck, because there was no Social Security. There was no-out of work payments like the government has now, you pay in and then you can draw your compensation during the times you're off. These things have never been heard of, so when a person lost their job and the factories and jobs just closed they couldn't pay them, they carried their creditors three or four months, these stores and then they couldn't any longer. So people were forced out of work and not a dime--there was no way for their families to get anything and this is what made it rough when President Hoover through '31, why he drew some criticism because there was no way for those families to get help. There were literally thousands upon thousands of people riding the freight trains, just parents, husbands, fathers, riding these trains to find something that they could turn to to make something.

In the cities this was quite rough. Now I was out there more for... young, I didn't have to be there you see, so it was a ball. In a way. We traveled the whole United States, North, South, East and West, my friend and I, that is different each year, each season, visited all these places saw all these things and there's no way to see the United States better than in a--from what was called commonly then--side door Pullmans. Those doors wide open and those trains traveling the length of the Mississippi and up and down the Grand Canyon of Colorado and all over the west and Washington and all those, and take your time you wasn't going anywhere.

KP: Did you ever have any problems with like train conductors, did they kick you off?

FR: Oh yes. Usually the train crew would never do it, but the railroads had policemen and it was their job to keep the hobo's off, although it was an impossible job, but then the railroad "Bulls" they were called would get on the train at a certain place, they would clean them all off, all the hobo's would have to get off. Then, of course, the next train would come through they couldn't have one on every train and they would all pile into it.

One night going out of Pocatello, it just looked like an anthill of literally people up over and all over the tops and sides and finding a place to settle down and it was common at that time, I think probably still today, that trains traveling East were loaded with produce, going West they weren't loaded. So traveling East it was hard to get inside a car to find any--to get out of the weather. Going West, why those boxcars would be filled with them.

KP: I bet you met a lot of interesting people.

FR: Yes, people in towns, and that and good people everywhere. We saw some bad things. Train wrecks part of it. Fellows killed falling from the trains, caught on the trains and we saw those things, they happened because there were just so many.

KP: Let's see. The government started the CCC Boy's didn't they about then?

FR: About that time. Now, when President Roosevelt, and he gets a lot of criticism, but, he's still rated as one of the greatest presidents. Now, as soon as he took office in 32', elected the fall of 31' and in 32' why, he called a bank holiday. Everybody said that if they go in it would be the end of... He closed all the banks for one full week. This is all we ever heard, "why the country's ruined, we knew what would happen if he got in there." But what he did was to stabilize the banks and very few banks went broke after that because I guess it was probably about the middle of '32, because he set up the Federal Reserve System and if there was a run this bank--the others all came to its aid, paid off the depositors and after a day or so the money would start filtering back if the bank wasn't closed. Then he started the Public Work System, PWA, and they worked for a dollar a month, or I mean a dollar a day, thirty dollars a month. They, there was some criticism about it, later on when things started getting a little better. The farmers who had a little something would have liked to hire a man, but, they'd have to pay a little more. This kept families going. They worked. They built buildings. They cleared brush and that from right-a-ways, and built roads and built schools.

KP: Did they work up here in the park?

FR: Yes. Built parks and things of this sort. Now the Burton School was built with WPA labor and these are examples and they worked. Of course, you get a few lazy ones, who sponge a little bit, but the majority of them were good workers and it served a good purpose.

KP: So you were working as a school teacher and you never really thought about joining with any of this?

FR: No, I never had and I wasn't married until 35' and the depression was still on and I had a job that gave us a little something and so I never had to take part in any of that.

KP: How was the schooling here? Did you have the books and the supplies that you needed?

FR: No, libraries were unheard of. You just didn't have the money for books in the schools this was before the depression. Gosh, if there was a handful of books they were read and reread, and really treasured. Source books, dictionaries, of course, whether they were home or at school. I think we've always had dictionaries as I recall. The seven months was the school years throughout that time because of the scarcity of money and this, seven months was as long as the school lasted. Teaching was alright there for awhile, it wasn't much, but it was better for awhile, but then right after that along 35' after that there were better paid government jobs and teaching just went downhill. I had to quit teaching in 46' no 44', the fall of 44', I quit teaching and was out for 18 years because I couldn't afford to put my children into school on a teacher's wages. So, I quit and went into farming and it was good for a number of years and then it really went to pot and I got back and Mr. Catmull, Superintendent Catmull, asked me if I would come and help out, and that's how I got back. I haven't gone and finished school now you need a four year degree and then you only needed a two year degree. I had a life time certificate with two years for that. I could have been Superintendent of School had I been chosen for that, given the job on a two year certificate from Ricks College.

KP: How many schools were there?

FR: More than there are today, every little community had a school. There are a few that have closed. Plano and these different places around. But every little community, the transportation wasn't good at first; we went to school during that time just horseback and to high school. I went the first year Madison started down here. I'd registered at Sugar City then. Our little community of Hibbard out there why they decided to support the Rexburg Schools and it was here. It was only two years. Then I finished my junior and senior year up at Ricks College. Then they had the two years of college, junior college.

KP: So, you started teaching after you got out of college?

FR: No, after I got out of Ricks College.

KP: Did you feel that the people were more close then?

FR: Yes, there's no question, everyone wasn't so busy and people had time to visit. I can remember my dad he was never a barber by trade, but he was a good barber and he cut hair free of charge for everybody. They would come on Sundays, if you imagine, he wasn't a devote church goer, but he never had anything against the church. He would cut hair all day Sunday and mother would cook dinner for everyone. They'd never charge anything for it. He had clippers and shears, he could have been a top-notch barber and he was.

KP: Were you a member of the church then? (LDS)

FR: Yes, my father and mother were members of the church and I was born into the church.

KP: Did you in your church meetings, and that type, did you help each other out more? Like on a welfare type program like we have now in the church?

FR: Welfare, I believe that it was about 1936 that the church first started the welfare program, but neighbors were always kind to each other and saw that each other had. I remember the epidemic of the flu during that time when it took members out of everyone's family and they would go in and help each other. Sickneses and that. Doctors you didn't go into town into the hospital. A doctor came into your home. I was down for three months with pneumonia, didn't get out at all for three months, today with penicillin and these drugs that we have today, pneumonia, no worse than mine to start with is knocked and they're up and around in two or three days, but I was down and two different times.

Things were different, they went slower, but now for amusement we did have dances, during the depression, the public dances. We would put on plays in the wards just like they do today, the one-act plays, but they were three-act plays and then we would exchange them with other wards, Burton, Plano--different places all would produce their own plays and maybe a couple a winter. And by the time you had had your practices and put on your play and take it over to Egin, to Plano and Parker, Burton and these places, Lyman why and they'd exchange with you. It gave something for people to go to.

The visiting in the homes, things like that were very prevalent and people had time to visit, and no one was in a hurry, playing games things of that sort. Today why you need a center. Now, the public dances, there were--there was one out at, the first in this whole area was in Hibbard at the Hibbard Gym out here. My dad was the Superintendent, no principal, chairman of the trustees at the time and they opened it up for public dances at this time and people came in sleighs all winter long from Idaho Falls to Ashton, to the dances out there and then they started later on the Edmonds built a school and they had dances out here in the gymnasiums you see? And this started some public dances. People went to dances and danced with everybody--this--you'd going steady was unheard of until, oh you know eventually, but you'd just go to a dance and dance with everybody. Everybody just had a good time. I sometimes think it was far better than today in that respect. You knew more people.

KP: Is that how you met your wife?

FR: No, and she lived only a mile and a half away from where I lived. She was a little younger, but I was in one of these ward plays. My cousin was taking (I had the male lead) and she was taking a ladies lead and she had to quit for some reason. My wife was asked to come take the part so that's where we met. It wasn't 'til about four years later that we were married, but that's where we met.

KP: What was her family's name?

FR: Sommer. They lived out there. She was younger and if it hadn't of been for the movie (play) I'm not sure that we would have met.

KP: It was through these associations that you had to meet?

FR: Right, yes.

KP: Is that how a lot of couples were meeting?

FR: Oh yes, there's no question because automobiles were around through the 20's but then they dropped off and there wasn't a great deal of cars. It started out though soon as people--gas was about 20-25 cents a gallon without tax at that time. Now, until this tax, here's another thing that gas has never been too high really. Now, I remember when this started you could buy gas for 30 cents a gallon with 10 cent state and federal tax, 6 cents federal and 4 cents state. That puts gas down to 20 cents a gallon; it was no cheaper right back in the depression actually if you take the tax out of it.

KP: In this area as the country was kind of standing up on its feet getting going again, was there a lot more money filtering in? Did you notice the change as it came?

FR: "Prosperity was always just around the corner." This is what we heard through all these years. You could buy an automobile at the first for about \$500--a Ford, Chevrolet, any car of that compress. It was interesting that it was harder to get the money for that then it is the \$5,000 car today. It was harder to get. You just didn't have the money. These things, clothing--a \$5--Now, here's an example. We think of high prices today, but shoes, it's still on the market today. Freeman brand of shoes. They're a good shoe. They were \$5 then, it took a month to earn a pair of shoes, a dollar and a quarter a day, no lets see it took a week, excuse me. A month for a suit of clothes. It took a week to earn a pair of shoes at 10 hours a day working for a dollar and a quarter. Ten hours in the fields. The better part of a week for a pair of shoes. Today you can buy Florshine or any of them, for about a days wages, you see suits of clothes don't ever remember having a suit of clothes under \$27.50. That sounds cheap today, \$27-\$32.50, mainly to \$35. so some things just weren't cheap in those times, cheap by today's standards, but not by those not by comparison with the days wages and prices are far better you hear them complain today but...

KP: From what I've talked to you, my impression is that you feel that you came out of the depression quite well. You and your family, the farm, very self dependant?

FR: Yes, and with all those people out of work and roaming the country no one criticizing everybody and the government and having these racial riots and things of this sort and knocking things, people didn't do it then like today. In a way, looking back on it even at the time there was fun, there was work, you couldn't go out and get a job in all the summers I was out on the road, though I did work a summer up in Washington and Oregon. That was for about \$2 a day. Things had started to pick up then. But on the first of that through 32' and 33', along in there, there just was not jobs to be had.

KP: The notorious hobo, eh?

FR: Yes, I enjoyed it. We never, I always asked for work and usually worked for something, bakeries, cleaning, out bakeries and homes, we'd do anything they had. Most of them didn't have anything and you could buy meals for 25 cents a full meal. So it wasn't so bad.

KP: Thank you Mr. Rock.