Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Lola Webster: 1930 Depression in Idaho

By Lola Webster

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Box 2 Folder 49

Oral Interview conducted by Perry Beckley

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi  March 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho
PB: This is oral history. I am Perry Beckley. Today is Tuesday, eighth of April, 1975. Today I am going to interview Mrs. Lola Webster and the general topic will be the 1930 Depression in Idaho. Mrs. Webster, could you tell me where you were born?

LW: I was born in Logan, Utah.

PB: How long have you lived in Idaho?

LW: I have lived here since about 1920.

PB: Where were your parents born?

LW: My parents were born in Richmond, and Brigham City, Utah.

PB: What was your occupation in Idaho at the time of the depression?

LW: Well, I was a young housewife, and I had a family of three. My husband was a dry farmer on the Rexburg bench, and we raised wheat.

PB: Can you tell me a little bit what your life was like before the depression started?

LW: Well, we stayed on the dry farm in the summer. We’d go up in April and stay until we had harvested our crop. We had access to a very fine garden, and so we were able to raise our vegetables and also can a lot of them for winter use.

I had to get three meals a day for three or four hired men as well as take care of my family; but I always had a young girl to assist me in the housework. We had a car and we made a trip to town about once or twice a week to get groceries. We had a cow and some chickens, and we had a very happy life there.

PB: Were the majority of the people preparing for the depression? Could they feel the depression coming on?

LW: Well, I don’t know really because I was taking care of my family, and I didn’t ever feel that I was in much of a depression until, I can’t remember the year, but it was when our wheat was selling for only twenty-five cents a bushel, and that didn’t nearly cover the expense of raising it. So that was the first I realized that we were in a depression.

PB: What was it selling for before?

LW: Well, I imagine about $1.90 or… I really don’t know; but I know that it fell to such a low price that we were all frightened.

PB: Does the economy today, in your opinion lead you to believe that a depression is at hand?
LW: No, I don’t think that it is, because we have a different situation today than we had then. At that time, people could buy stock on the margin, so they could gamble. They could just pay a very small amount down for stock and then expect to reap a big amount of money for it. But, today, you have to pay, if you go to the stock market, you have to pay more than a margin. You have to pay a larger amount. And so I feel that the stock market is much steadier than it was at that time.

And then, too, I feel that we have social security. And very few people… well, many people, elderly people especially, are living on that social security. In the 1930’s, we didn’t have that and so many people, if they didn’t have a crop; they just had nothing to live on.

PB: Did the effect of the depression in those days on the surrounding states such as Utah, Wyoming, Montana; did they effect the way Idaho functioned as a whole?

LW: Well, I think the fact that we’re all farming communities makes it much the same. You say Idaho and Utah? Of course, Utah did have mining and a few other different types of economy. Here, we had mostly agriculture; dry farming, farming, and cattle raising, and so it was much the same, I think.

PB: Can you remember any sacrifices that the government had every American make to get the country immediately out of the depression?

LW: Well, I think they started CC camps for the boys for many boys needed help. And they came out here and worked in the forests, and up at the Island Park, and other places; and they made their living that way.

And I remember that my husband worked on the road and he was paid, I believe it was seventeen dollars a week for himself and two horses, to do road work; and that helped us too, at the time.

PB: After the depression started, then you quit farming?

LW: Oh no, we didn’t quit farming because that’s all we could do, so we quit farming but it didn’t pay us enough to really live on. And so after the crop was in, Kenneth took the team and worked on helping build roads. Of course, we didn’t have roads like they have today.

PB: How much were groceries back then, and other items of importance?

LW: Well, of course, we always had our own flour and I made our own bread, so I didn’t have that; but I know bread sold for a nickel a loaf. And we didn’t ever buy milk. In fact, I didn’t ever see milk in cartons until much later because as long as the children were small, we always had a cow, and my husband or the boys (hired men) did the milking.

PB: Were any of your children in school at the time of the depression?

LW: Well, they were just beginning to go to school.
PB: Did their education get hindered in any way?

LW: Oh no, I don’t think so. No, I don’t think so.

PB: Mrs. Webster, could you tell me some of the ways you supplied your meat, or how you got your meat for your family.

LW: Well, we raised our own pigs, and in the winter, the men would get together, my husband’s father and his brothers, would get together and have a butchering. And they would kill these pigs and then we would help cure the hams and the bacons.

And I remember that we, in the summer we had a room that was filled with sawdust, and we would put the dried hams in there and they would keep very well.

And we also had a snow bank on the side of the hill up there and that would last all summer because we would use the straw, my husband would cover it with straw, so that even in the middle of the summer we could make ice cream and keep our refrigerators with a big piece of the snow.

PB: Could you tell me some things that might have helped control the depression back in those days?

LW: Well, I think the thing that really is quite important is the fact that you have unemployment so that they can be helped during the time when they haven’t worked, and I think that’s a very important thing.

PB: You said that you only got twenty-five cents a bushel for some of your wheat, and I was wondering if you thought that, was the middle man making more money than the farmer and the stores?

LW: Oh, I think so. They always have as far as since people have been suing stores. They are very important, and they have gotten more important as time goes by.

PB: You said you owned a car. Was gas hard to come by in those days for your car?

LW: Not for the farmer. The farmer had coupons. They were rationed by the county and according to our need, we were given gas. So the farmers were very lucky at that time because they had the gas that they needed for their operations, for their car, and also to run...probably...I wonder whether we had tractors at that time, I suppose we did, because my husband was one of the very first ones to have a tractor and it was operated by gas and then later diesel for fuel.

PB: How did you heat your home at that time?

LW: Well, mostly with wood. We had coal stoves that we cooked with, and coal wasn’t very expensive at that time and we’d have several tons of coal. And then, we could also go a little way up and get wood out. And my husband would chop it up and we would
have that to start our fires with and also to heat the house and to cook with. In fact, I love to cook with wood.

I remember that I could just figure out how many sticks of wood it would take to make a very fine angel food cake; and my families were very proud of the fact that I could make such a perfect cake without using a box of mix. I’m telling you dearly.

PB: Were the winters very hard during the depression?

LW: Well, they’re just about like they are now.

PB: Not really too much different?

LW: Not different that I remember, because we had to just stay in the house and keep warm.

PB: At the end of the depression did wheat start going up all at once, or did it go up gradually?

LW: Oh, no. It went up quite a bit. You know, after the economy got going again and of course during the depression the banks closed and that was quite a hardship for the people. Because people had their money that they put in impounded and I remember my mother was teaching school here at the time, and she put her check in the bank and the next morning the banks were impounded, and she couldn’t draw her money until they relieved that situation.

PB: Did she live in Rexburg at that time?

LW: Yes, she was up here and she was teaching in high school, at Madison High School.

PB: What was her husband’s occupation?

LW: Well, she was a widow. Her name was Effie E. Merrill, and she had been a widow for a number of years, and had gone in and got her degree and was teaching school. So she came up here because she liked to be by her family.

PB: During the depression, did she still teach school at that time?

LW: Yes, she kept on and taught school because it wasn’t too long until they relieved that situation with the banks and the economy.

PB: Did her salary, while she was teaching school, did her salary drop drastically?

LW: No, I don’t think it did. I don’t think the salary was very much at the time. I think maybe it was one hundred-fifty dollars a month.

PB: Did Rexburg have many doctors at that time in the depression?
LW: Well, because of the flu we had three or four doctors come in and we had, I think, well I believe about four doctors.

PB: Was there a serious illness at that time?

LW: No, the serious illness was in 1918 and 1919 when the flu epidemic was here. And that a serious illness that many people suffered from.

PB: Did you have any mortgage payments on your farm that you had to pay in any way, or was your farm paid for?

LW: Well, my husband was buying a farm from his father, so he was very fortunate. His father was patient and he helped him that way. And I think we borrowed, usually we run on we’d pay once a year, and we’d charge at the grocery store (Flamm’s had a grocery store up where the Valley bank is), and we’d buy our groceries for the year and then pay after we sold our wheat.

PB: Most of the stores around town, would they let people charge?

LW: Well, I can’t remember. I can’t remember that. I don’t think we ever charged only for a few of the, but sugar, and some of the things we didn’t raise.

PB: Most of the people that lived in Rexburg, what was their general occupation? Farming?

LW: Yes, farming and store keepers. And gas stations.

PB: So nobody was in really serious trouble as far as…?

LW: Well, I think our Relief Society has always taken care of people that they felt were in need. And I know we used to always give our Relief Society fifty cents or a dollar whatever we could spare whenever they would come and call on us. And they’ve discontinued that now.

PB: In what ways did the Relief Society help?

LW: Well, they did a great deal because the women, early Relief Society women, had a wheat fund; and in every bad situation for a country, or starving or anything, they had this wheat that they could send to help them. The wheat was stored in some big elevators just north of Salt Lake near Kaysville, I think.

PB: What were some of the other things that you remember how the Relief Society functioned?
LW: Well, I remember that they, in the early days, well before 1918, we didn’t have undertakers here, and so the women would go and help lay out the dead (wash them and make their clothes), and they even used to sit up with them at night.

I talked to some of the ladies that remember that, and I said, “Why would they do that?” And they said, “Well, to preserve the body.” They’d put ice around the body until they had the funeral. They didn’t have embalming at that time; I guess that’s why that was necessary.

PB: Do you remember any tragedies that were specifically related to the depression?

LW: Well, I remember hearing of them. I remember hearing of men jumping out of the window because the market had crashed, and they had lost all of their savings and other people’s savings as well.

PB: Suicide?

LW: Yes.

PB: OK, I’d like to thank you very much Mrs. Webster and this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by further researchers.