

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

# Louise Price - Life during the Depression

By Louise Price

March 14, 1974

## Box 2 Folder 28

Oral Interview conducted by Kent Bartholomew

Transcribed by Maren Miyasaki      November 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

KB: My name is Kent Bartholomew. Today March 14, 1974, I'm going to interview Louise Price. The general topic will be the Depression in the Upper Snake River Valley. Mrs. Price where were you born?

LP: I was born in Downey, Idaho, but later when I was three, we moved to Shelley which is eighty miles north of where I was born.

KB: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

LP: I've lived here nearly twelve years.

KB: Where were your parents born?

LP: They were born in Utah, outside of Salt Lake in a little town called Sandy.

KB: What was your occupation?

LP: We were farmers as I was growing up.

KB: What's your occupation now?

LP: I'm teaching school now in the junior high here in Rexburg.

KB: Okay, what was some of the first signs of a Depression that you can remember?

LP: We never were very rich, so I suppose I didn't notice it as much as some people did. But, about first things I heard about were the people who had money couldn't even cash their checks because the banks had gone broke. And I thought that was an unusual thing because most of the time they, these people seemed to be fairly wealthy to me. When I found out that they—even the school teachers for instance—couldn't cash their checks and a little while later they didn't even make out checks. They made out some sort of certificates which would entitle them to money later on when they would be able to cash them. Of course, they weren't making very much money at that time anyway. I knew teachers who were making fifty dollars a month, and they also did the janitor work and taught in really unfavorable circumstances compared to what we have now.

KB: What do you get paid now?

LP: Well, our base rate in Madison is well, I guess they're trying to get seven thousand dollars for beginning students with a degree or beginning teachers with a degree.

KB: How old was you at that time?

LP: At that time that the Depression began? I had just started to high school in 1929 when the first crash came. I wasn't quite thirteen years old. I had skipped a grade, and so I was a little younger than most of my classmates.

KB: What was your father doing at the time?

LP: He was farming. And in the wintertime and well in the fall as soon as the crops were out, he would work in the sugar factory at Shelley. The sugar factory would usually run—oh probably—from late October until January or February at that time and so he had really a more lucrative job in the winter than he did in the summer because he was never too successful as a farmer.

KB: Did his pay go down any when the Depression struck?

LP: Well, everybody's pay went down then. But, probably the most noticeable was that there weren't any jobs. While the main crash I guess came in 1929, up until that time from about, oh after the World War until 1929, things were considered to be quite prosperous. Then from 1929 until about '35, everything was really in the dumps. I graduated from high school able to take dictation at a hundred and twenty words a minute and type at 60 words a minute. But, there weren't any jobs and that year that I was out of high school I was seventeen that fall. I finally took a job for a dollar for a week and my board and room in Pocatello. This just keeping house for a family of five, and I did all the washing and ironing and cooking and cleaning for that many—for six of us really, ate my share, I'm sure.

KB: What people seemed to be more well off than the rest?

LP: Well, I'm not just right sure. I think people who owned their own farms and didn't have to make payments on farms and were able to keep them were probably better off, or considered better off although they usually didn't have any more money to spend than any of the rest of us. But they did have a place to live and were able to grow their own food. I remember in the year of about 1930, we used to pick potatoes and sort potatoes and thin beets and do things like this—field work for what little money that we could get. We picked potatoes that fall for a nickel for a full sack. On a good day I was able to pick a hundred full sacks. Five dollars a day was almost unheard of. Now this was before I got desperate and went to Pocatello to work for less. But, I remember the next fall, many people instead of trying to—it was the spring—see the farmers usually held their potatoes in the cellar hoping to get a better price. In the spring, I saw many, many people haul their potatoes to the Snake River bridge and empty 'em in the river because they couldn't even get 25 cents a sack for them. Potatoes just don't keep, so they had to be emptied out. They were fed as much as their livestock could possibly eat, but they had too many and they had to get them out of their cellars.

KB: Do you remember anybody—seeing anybody lose their farms and property?

LP: There were a great many farms that were lost, in a little valley that I lived in later, over near Picabo. We owned a hundred-sixty acres that was once owned by four different families. They all lost their little farms there, and it was sold in one plot. Where they had had quite a thriving community with a bank and two or three stores and a

school and a cheese factory—after the Depression one family owned nearly all that little valley and these people had gone, I don't know where they all went, but we often went around and looked in their years in the corners of the land that we had owned there and of other property that we could see. Some of the houses were still standing and some of the out buildings. We could even find a well or two, but most of them had just burned down or fallen down and been plowed under so to speak when the new owners took over.

KB: Was the government very popular during the Depression?

LP: Of course, we had President Hoover who was always trying to help us to economize. In fact, there was a phrase, "You better Hooverize on this and Hooverize on that." That became quite well known because he encouraged everybody to make the most of what they had and to be very careful with the remaining things that they did have on hand. When President Roosevelt started his New Deal—it was—well, he campaigned with the idea of trying to break up the depression and get people started on the road to prosperity. So the government sponsored quite a few things to give people work. They not only did that, but they gave commodities to people who were not able to work. Of course, we lived in just a small place and we weren't acquainted with the soup lines and the bread lines that the big cities heard about, but we'd read about it once in awhile and hear about it once in awhile. When we did go to the movies we would see this on the news reel where people were lined up for blocks trying to get a little bit of bread or some soup and also commodities. So we really felt that we weren't suffering that much. We learned to cook potatoes in about fifty different ways, and we ate a lot of bread and cereal. People who had a cow and a garden would somehow survive and get along. In our family, though we hardly ever saw any money, we didn't suffer any. We didn't have much variety. We had—there was electricity in some of the homes around where we lived. Our house was wired, but we couldn't afford the five dollars down to get it turned on. Even after we did, the minimum bill that you could pay was a dollar and if ever our electricity bill went over a dollar, my mother just had a fit because she didn't see how we could possibly pay so much. We hauled our drinking water a lot of the time during that period. It was really difficult to live the way we wanted to, but then we managed to get along fine. We had lots of fun. I was dating at the time, and our dates usually consisted of dances that were sponsored by the church. The boys paid twenty-five cents and the girls didn't pay anything. They had weekly dances of this kind. In the schools we had our sports and school activities, and everyone would chip in to buy things. There was a time for a couple of winters when it was quite the rage to steal chickens and fry them. There were a lot of "chickarees" being held. My father told me I didn't have to steal chickens as long as we had any in the chicken coup. So it wasn't at all uncommon for me to bring quite a gang of young people to our house in the middle of the night or sometime in the night and go out and raid our own chicken coup. That got a little tiresome because I got to the point where I had to clean up all the mess, and I didn't know whether our chickens were going to last 'til next year's hatch. But I was quite popular right at that time because I could furnish a little food.

KB: What about taxes? Did you pay any taxes during that time?

LP: My father didn't own any property. He was renting and so he didn't have to pay any taxes. In fact, I never even heard of income taxes or anything like this all that time I was growing up.

KB: Well, you was pretty well self-sufficient then, living on a farm?

LP: For what it was worth, we managed to eat and keep warm in the winter, although we usually had one fire in the house and all slept in the cold and had ice on their sheets in the morning where we had breathed. My father would go out with a team and get wood during the winter. We'd chop it and saw it. We all knew how to chop and saw wood. We kept one fire going. My mother did a great deal of canning. We usually had a hog or two to butcher. Sometimes some of our neighbors or our uncle they'd share a beef. They'd butcher a beef and share it. Of course, we had chickens because my mother always set a lot of hens. We had quite a few chickens so we had our eggs and chickens now and then to eat.

KB: Did your father ever go hunting or anything like that?

LP: Don't believe he was ever very successful at hunting. Once in awhile he would share a deer or an elk that two or three of them had managed to get together. Once he brought home some meat that looked awfully good and smelled a little strong and strange to us, but we hadn't had any meat for a long time, and he didn't tell us until after we had eaten some that it was bear, and then my mother wasn't very anxious to cook any more of it. We thought it tasted good, because we were hungry.

KB: How about transportation? How did you get around?

LP: Mostly we walked. About this time we lived a couple of miles from school; and while there was a school bus, we usually had to walk about half mile to catch it. If we wanted to stay for anything special, you know at school, we either had to stay with our friends in town or walk home and walk back. We very seldom went to church, because we didn't have very much to wear. And so, we went to school. I managed to go to school, though, without being absent nor tardy for five years. So we were healthy in spite of the fact that we had little to eat and lived uncomfortably. None of us suffered from any diseases from that. If there was a vitamin shortage, we didn't know much about it because we didn't know much about vitamins.

KB: Did the church play a very important part in your life?

LP: No, because we just didn't go. My parents were not active at all until after I was a senior in high school and then my mother insisted on going to church even though she had to walk. We either had to catch a ride with somebody else or walk. We didn't really do very much. I think that I depended a great deal upon the church dances as I said before. Without really realizing, I don't believe I hardly realized that the church was sponsoring those dances. I knew it was held in the Shelley Tabernacle that has just burned down. It was built at the time I was a freshman in high school, so all our dancing

was done there. Occasionally when I could stay in town with somebody, I would go to church sometimes I'd get roped in a little bit to be on some programs and things like this. To attend church regularly the way we do now, our family just didn't do that.

KB: Was your father pretty much a handy man?

LP: Well, as I think about handy man now, I think it was my grandfather that could always fix everything and always had a set of tools and wrenches and things that he would bring and kind of put the ironing board together and fix the broken things around the house when he would visit us. Sometimes he'd stay for a month or so with us, and he really fixed things. My father wasn't really that much interested. He was a very easy man to please. I mean if he had just any old place to sleep and sit and get warm and eat. I never once heard him ever complain about anything. Of course, we thought he was too easygoing. If he had and everyone did, if he had hadn't been as easy to please himself perhaps he'd have managed a little better than he did.

KB: How many people was in your family during that time?

LP: Well, at that time we had seven girls and one boy living. My mother had lost three children. Then your mother was born after that. She was the youngest in the family, and she was born when I was almost twenty. So she didn't get in on the rigors of the Depression. But as I said our family it was never very prosperous so we were about the same all the time.

KB: With all those people in the family, you had to learn to share and share alike.

LP: Oh yes, we really learned to get along well with each other. We wore each others' clothes, and we really shared the work. That's one good thing that our family knew how to do. My mother was a good housekeeper and a good manager. She had to be. We all had our work to do. Well sometimes my three sisters and I, we each had a room to clean on Saturday. That meant house cleaning it. We did the whole bit. Sometimes we were able to get jobs tending people's children. We didn't call it babysitting then—it was baby chasing because the kids in those days were wild—I'll tell you that. I remember taking care of a family of four children. Doing all day's dishes and staying all night and doing next day's dishes too for a dime. We usually used it to go to the show if there was any possibility that it didn't have to be used for something else. We, in the summer, we worked in the fields. My father had no boys. His first five children were girls. Since I was the oldest I knew how to do farm work as well as the work inside. In the summer I was usually outside working. I knew how to harness horses and drive them and pitch hay and do all kinds of things that a boy my age would've done, but I was big and strong and healthy and I enjoyed it. My dad was very good company. We always had lots of fun with him wherever we were. We'd sing a lot, and he'd tell us stories of what were the olden days to him. He kept us real happy while we were working hard. When I was a senior in high school, fall of 1931, I won the potato picking contest in Shelley on Spud Day. I found out later that I was given the dubious honor of being state champion lady spud picker. I think I'm the only one that ever remembered that. I picked up two sacks

of potatoes that were scattered along Main Street. I was wearing a dress. We always dressed up fir to kill on Spud Day if there was any possibility. That was a big celebration. I was asked to come right out of the crowd and come out and pick potatoes. It was quite a funny affair. The spud picking contest became quite a famous thing in Shelley after that. I knew well the fellow who held it for fifteen or twenty years, I used to tell him I was going to challenge him, but we never quite got around to that. He was a classmate of mine too.

KB: When was Spud Day held? What was the date?

LP: Well, it was usually held the third Wednesday in October, but they have changed that now. Sometimes the weather got in the way. They used to give away tons of baked potatoes. We would often stop the trains and the buses and everything that went through and serve baked potatoes with butter to everybody that came through the team.

KB: Did you look forward to Christmas?

LP: Well, it came to the point where I wasn't thrilled about Christmas. When I was little, of course, we had an interesting Christmas. Although we probably didn't get very much, we thought it was great. Our stockings were filled, and we got an orange in one every year. That's about the only time we ever saw an orange. My grandmother always sent us something from Downey—something that she had made. Usually in every package she sent a handful of lumps of sugar that we thought were a real treat. Then she always set my dad a raisin bread cake loaf that she called Uola Caca. She was from the old country, and she had Norwegian names for everything. I think my grandmother saved us a lot of Christmases because that was usually about the only thing that we got other than what our folks could make for us. The Christmas that I was fourteen, I was staying in town so that I could go to school because at that time we lived about four miles from school and then no bus came. One day my dad came on a horse; and after school he got me to go with him to the store to buy a few things for the kids. Mother went sometimes a whole year without ever going to town. He had less than five dollars to spend on our Christmas, but we bought what we could—what we could manage. Then I rode home behind the horse—behind him on the horse. It wasn't until we got home that I realized that I didn't have any presents. My grandmother had sent the usual Uola Caca and sugar lumps, and she had made doll clothes for the kid's dolls. But, I was too big by then to have a doll, so I had nothing for Christmas. That night I played Santa Claus and helped fill the stockings of my little brother and sisters. The next morning when everybody got up in a wild rush, I didn't get up. I can remember not being at all anxious to even get up. And after awhile, my mother feeling real sorry about the fact that I didn't have any presents brought me a cup of hot chocolate and a piece of Grandma's raisin bread. That's the only time I can ever remember eating breakfast in bed when I wasn't sick.

KB: How'd you get the things you needed if you didn't have any money? Did you do any trading or bartering?

LP: Quite often we had a little bit of cream to sell and some eggs. Sometimes my dad would trade potatoes or something for, to some of the people that we knew who didn't have potatoes, to get a few things. We were very, very careful about things that we did have to sell like butter. Often we went without it, so that we could sell some butter and get some sugar that we couldn't obtain ourselves. I remember that we had a five gallon can in which we'd put our cream in that. We'd skim the milk and put the cream in that some of the time and then take that to town on Saturday. The money that we got for that, we'd buy what few groceries we could that we couldn't produce ourselves. At that time, you could buy three pounds of hamburger for a quarter. It wasn't very often that we could afford to have any meat unless we had it ourselves. I don't believe the hamburger was as good as we thought it was at that time. In the fall our whole family would go out, after we got our own crops up, we would go all out and pick the potatoes. My dad would empty all the baskets and my mother would hold the sacks and all us kids would pick the potatoes. We could really get quite a few done. We also pick apples on shares and in the summer we picked berries on shares besides having our own garden. We did a great deal of canning. We managed to get along fine. I think we were just as well off as most people were as far as eating.

KB: What about your clothes?

LP: Oh, we learned to make everything out of flour sacks! We did eat a great deal of bread so we had quite a few flour sacks. Among some of the things that we used sacks for were sheets and towels and diapers and all our underwear was made of flour sacks. Our petticoats and our pajamas were all made of flour sacks. Sometimes with a little bit of gingham trimming that we get from the scrap bag, we learned to sew our own clothes at a very young age too. Nothing ever fit—I don't suppose anything ever fit, but it covered us up and was always kept clean and so we didn't know that we must've looked terrible. I remember my mother saying to my dad who was taking wheat out to the mill to be ground into flour to be sure to get hundred pounders, because she needed sheets. It took five big flour sacks to make a sheet, and it would also make the backing for a quilt. My mother would dye this lining for the quilt and then we'd make quilts from scraps of cloth that we had; from overalls, from almost anything that we could find that could be sewn together. We would make things like this. We made our own rugs too. We crocheted them, and we had two or three ways of making, of weaving them. That's the only kind of floor covering we had. Sometimes we had a little piece of linoleum in our kitchen. Mostly our floors were bare with just scatter rugs. They had to be scrubbed. Wood had to be scrubbed with a scrubbing brush and down on our knees and homemade soap. It was a real job to clean the floors in those days.

KB: What about your outer clothes like coats and gloves and hats?

LP: I don't know, I don't remember ever having a coat that wasn't homemade until I was in the eighth grade. That summer I had been given a runt pig by one of our neighbors if I would pull alfalfa from the ditch bank and feed his pigs all summer. He gave me this little pig. I was always careful to see that that pig got plenty to eat when I had to do the feeding. At the time that the pigs were supposed to be sold, my dad was helping Mr.

Johnson load up the pigs and he said, "You've got Louise's pig there." And he says, "Oh well, she's had the use of it all summer. I didn't think that she really was going to keep it." He unloaded that pig and brought it home, I sold that pig for fifteen dollars, and I bought a new coat, the first one that I had ever had. My others had been either hand-me-downs from some of my aunts or my grandmother or made from things that were handed down to me.

KB: Was there much activity going on in the winter time?

LP: We had lots of sleigh rides and we skated. I'll have to tell you about my skates that were such great treasures to me. I saved and worked and was so anxious to get those skates before Christmas. They were on sale, but I didn't have sense enough to know why. It wasn't 'til I got home that I found out that both the skates were for the same foot. They weren't even the same brand. But I'd been able to buy them for a dollar and a half, and I thought that was just great. They were the kind that had to clamp on the soles of your shoes and they didn't stay on very well, and so I spent half my time on the ice and half the time fixing them. They were the greatest things that ever happened to me up to that time. I could never afford roller skates; and of course, we had no sidewalks on the farm anyway, and I never learned to ride a bike because we could never afford to have one.

KB: What about the doctors at that time?

LP: We didn't have doctors unless we were ready to die or when my mother had a baby, and then she didn't call one until it was time for her to have it. Until I was fourteen, I can't ever remember having a doctor at our house or for me or anything. At this time I went to school and as I said before, I'd had about five years of perfect attendance. My teacher thought that I must have the mumps, and so she sent me down to the doctor. I was a lot more worried about how much money that would cost than I was about whether I had the mumps or not. When I went into the doctor's office he said, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "Well, I didn't want to come, but my teacher made me come and talk with you." I can just imagine now what he must have been thinking. But he said, "Well, what's your trouble?" and I said, "How much would you charge for a little bit of advice?" He said, "Well it depends on what kind of advice. What is your trouble?" And finally I broke down and said, "Have I got the mumps?" And I can't help but think now since I'm older how relieved he looked because he must've thought something else was wrong. He looked at my face and said no, there was a swelling there, but it was not the mumps and not to worry about it. I never saw another doctor until I was nineteen years old and got in a wreck and was taken to a hospital to have my face sewed up. So my experience with doctors and our family's experience with doctors was almost nil.

KB: Did your mother do pretty much most of the nursing and mending that needed to be done?

LP: Yes, we didn't seem to have very much sickness. One of my sisters had rheumatism and was confined to bed for the whole winter. We didn't have any medicine or any

doctor's help. She just had to stay in bed and my other sister taught her, her lessons the whole winter. They were in the same grade. When we had accidents like getting burned or cut or something like that, it was mended up the best we could, and we didn't even think about going to a doctor.

KB: What about dentists? Did you ever get a chance to go to the dentist?

LP: We should have done because I can remember having lots of toothaches. When I was ten, I went to the dentist and had several teeth fixed. I remember that my mother asked the dentist if she could do some cleaning or some washing for him to pay for my dental bill. We didn't want to go to the dentist, because we thought it would hurt awfully bad. We really suffered for it, because when we did go to the dentist then when our tooth was so bad we couldn't stand it, it was pulled—it wasn't filled. The few fillings that we did have, they didn't deaden your face. They just ground away at it until everyone was so scared to go to the dentist. I guess we weren't very anxious to do it anyway even though we knew we needed it. We just didn't have the money to pay the dentist bill so we didn't go.

KB: What about the eye doctor?

LP: We never went. None of us ever wore glasses although at school I was told that I should've had glasses from the time I was in first grade, but as long as I could see my folks didn't think that was necessary because I didn't ever get any glasses. I must've been forty years old before I ever got glasses.

KB: Did your father ever pay you for working on the farm?

LP: Not very often. Sometimes he'd say, "When we get the beets all thinned we'll go to town and have a malted mild or a strawberry nut sundae or something like this. As far as giving us money for what we did that didn't happen. I was about ten years old I guess before I realized that some of the other men were paying their children for the work that they did on their farms. So one day when we were working in the potato harvest, my dad told me to do something and I said, "Will you give me a nickel if I do it?" and he said, "No, and I'll give you a lickin' if you don't!" So I didn't have very much choice, and I went ahead and did what he told me to and never expected much else for it.

KB: Were you pretty well relieved when the Depression was over with?

LP: By the time it was over with, I was married and had somebody else to take care of me, because it lasted quite a long while. I went on my mission during the Depression. You might think that's rather strange in view of the fact that I grew up in inactivity in the church. I was worthy to go on a mission even though I didn't go to church as often as I should've done. I know that that often happened in those days. When the bishop came and asked me if I would go on a mission if the ward would pay what it took to send me, I was glad to be able to do this. For two years, the ward sent me twenty-five dollars a month, and I filled a mission in Omaha and Denver and Cheyenne and managed to get

along just fine on twenty dollars a month. But whenever I would brag about that my husband would say, "Well I filled my mission for ten dollars a month." He was in the California mission. The boys were allowed to hitchhike, and they had no traveling expenses, and our traveling expenses really amounted to quite a bit. In the California mission, the presidency of the church asked quite a few members to give the missionaries one meal a day. There were quite a few members there, and so many times that's all the missionaries had was one meal a day. We had nothing like this and had to pay our rent and traveling expenses and clothes and everything. We got by pretty well on twenty-five dollars a month. When I married in 1938, I had worked for fifty dollars a month for—in the office of the school superintendent. I had been doing this work since I had come home from my mission. When I was married, we were farming again. My husband was a farmer. He said that we could have fifty dollars worth of credit from a little country store where we lived to keep us eating for the summer, besides our garden and our cow. Somehow or another, we managed quite well and even fed hired men on that. We didn't spend over that fifty dollars a month. So the Depression was still on. It was a good ten years before prices came up and before we could get much out of any of our crops or anything. The people managed to live through it. I think in the country they were better off than they were in the city where they had to have help from the government. We never did.

KB: Can you think of any closing comments you might have—any advise?

LP: Well, I think that it would be well for all of us to learn to get along on less and learn to pay for things as we go. I feel like now days you can get almost anything you want on credit. It isn't a good policy I think to go into debt for things that you really don't need. These were happy times for us. We had a great time and I remember it all fondly, but of course, I'm not anxious to try to do it again. When people talk now days of how the young people couldn't possibly get along, I feel like smiling because I think they could. I think that anybody can do anything that they have to do it if they know that it's necessary; and I believe that should a disaster or a depression come upon us, that we'd learn that we could do with less, and we could manage somehow to get along just like we used to.

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