DPW: This is oral history. I am Darell Palmer Woolley. Today, December 9, 1974, I am going to interview Lowell Luke. The general topic will be “The Great Depression of the United States.” Mr. Lowe Luke, where were you born?

LL: Orderville, Utah.

DPW: How long did you live there?

LL: I was about a year old when my father moved to Beaver, Utah to attend school. He left Beaver and went to Utah State at Logan, Utah and we came to Idaho in December 1916 where he taught at Ricks College, and I entered grade school there in Rexburg.

DPW: Where were your parents born?

LL: My father was born at Junction, Utah and my mother was born in Orderville, Utah.

DPW: What was your occupation?

LL: I taught school the first two years after leaving Rick College, then I started managing a lumber yard, I mean working at a Lumber Yard. After being a manager for six years I quit and bought a farm in Salem, Idaho. I farmed for 29 years along with working for Ricks College 17 years ago this month.

DPW: What was your occupation during the depression?

LL: I taught school for two years and then the next nine years I worked for the Boys Payette Lumber Company.

DPW: Can you tell me what you think might have brought on the depression?

LL: No, I don’t have any idea what caused it. Things seemed to be going along real good, then all at once something happened. Companies started laying men off, business started to slow up. There was much unemployment. I don’t know what caused it. I wish I knew.

DPW: Do you think that the president could have done anything to help it from getting any worse?

LL: Well, at the time that it happened, Hoover was president. He had the legislature which was of the opposite party; they didn’t get along at all, whatever Hoover suggested, congress fought him and they didn’t accomplish anything. They tried several things, suggested several things, but nothing was ever done. It didn’t seem that the government did much until after Roosevelt became president. Then he started quite a few programs which tried to revive business and to help the unemployment, which did a great deal towards relieving the conditions at that time.
DPW: Can you tell me a little about the prices of gasoline, automobiles and transportation?

LL: Well, I don’t remember a lot of the prices; I can remember the wages were awfully cheap, men used to work for a dollar a day. I walked four miles, worked from 7:00 in the morning until 6:00 at night, and got a dollar a day and my dinner, and we worked. We really worked. It was manual labor. Food prices were cheap, cattle prices were cheap, and my brother in-law said he sold several big cows for $15 a piece for a cow. Everything was cheap. Farmers didn’t get anything for their produce, of course, everything was cheap, automobiles. I can remember when you could buy a real good car, a brand new car for $800. I can remember when a Chevrolet got up to a $1000, we thought things were getting really pretty expensive, but that wasn’t until about 1940, when we paid $1000 for a Chevrolet car. It was nothing in those days for a man to work $30 a month and he’d work hard all day long for the $30 a month.

DPW: You said $30 a month. Did they work on Sunday too?

LL: Some of them, some jobs, I can remember a fellow, he had five boys that were young when I was a young man and his dad was feeding cattle for a fellow there, he worked seven days a week. Thirty dollars a month is what he got for his wages.

DPW: What about food produce and the cost of living?

LL: Well, things were very cheap, I can’t remember a lot of the prices, but I remember canned goods were very cheap. Golly I can’t remember, my wife could tell us some of the prices of food, I remember a lot of the five and ten cents a pound for hamburger, and eggs were very easily woomp, I remember buying $5 worth of groceries for my folks for Christmas, and I could hardly carry it out in a big cardboard box, I got canned salmon, and several types of canned food. It’s quite a lot of groceries.

DPW: So then material goods like refrigerators and automobiles were expensive and food was cheap?

LL: Well, we didn’t have refrigerators in those days, not in 1930. We didn’t have refrigerators or deep freezes and things like that. Automobiles were pretty cheap, that is compared to what they are now, but, of course, at the time you paid $1000 for a car in those times you’ve worked quite a while to make your $1000. My father was teaching school about 1930, and I forgot just exactly what he got, it seemed like it was around $3000 for being the principal of the school.

DPW: $3,000 a year?

LL: For a year, yes. The time made it, he kept nine of us children, and you didn’t have a lot to go on. Things were proportion, of course, you didn’t get anything for your work, but it didn’t cost you so much, three or four dollars for a pair of shoes. You got a pretty good pair of shoes for around $4 or $5. Clothing was quite reasonable, of course, only
making a dollar a day it took you about three days to make a pair of shoes, but they were of good material and they lasted a good long while.

DPW: So then nine kids with nine pairs of shoes that would be quite a lot.

LL: Yes, it would take quite a bit with a $3,000 wage. We used to thin beets; I think we got around $5 an acre. I’ve seen some guys that could thin an acre a day, but not very many. Most of them it took about two days to make $5 thinning beets.

DPW: Did you know any farmers?

LL: Oh yes, I’ve worked for a lot of farmers, a lot of them. I remember after I went to Ricks, I went out to Mud Lake and hayed. Men got a dollar and half a day and were bored for haying all day, ten hours a day in the field. I got two dollars a day for stacking. Stackers got 6 cent a day more than fellows working in the field. School was real cheap; I think tuition was around $35 a quarter. We had three quarters in those times. It costs about $105 for tuition a year at Ricks.

DPW: Were the farmers you worked for affected? How were they affected?

LL: Oh yeah! They didn’t make anything; everything they produced was so cheap, since they had a hard time paying their way. Hogs and cattle were cheap, if I can mention since one man sold several cows for $15 each, so they didn’t have any money to splurge on. It wasn’t long, those kinds of prices didn’t still too long, but yet you take along 1939 to 40 prices weren’t still too much high then that. They were better than that, but there was about six or eight years when things were really cheap, from 1929 until about 1936 to 37 before they started coming up a little, but then it was very gradual things didn’t increase too fast.

DPW: After paying the workers, and after paying for all the bills, how much money, do you think, did farmers make, say about a day?

LL: Well, I can’t remember, most of the farmers, they maintained their families, but they didn’t buy lots of new equipment and stuff like that. Of course, it wasn’t until let see about when, first tractors I ever saw was about 1933. They were very small and weren’t too expensive. It wasn’t until along the in the forties that they started buying more equipment. Even then in 1946 we bought an international tractor, model M tractor and cultivator for $1,750, that same size of tractor now would cost, well let’s see Floyd bought a two plow tractor and he said he paid $6,000 for it; he sold out about three years ago, so it would be along 1968 to 69 that the same size tractor would cost him over $6,000.

DPW: Who is Floyd?

LL: He’s my brother; he works over there right around the college. We farmed out here for a number of years. In 1946 we bought this international cultivator for $1,700 and the
same size tractor when he bought it in the 60s it was about 66 or 67, it cost him over $6,000. So you see, there’s been quite a change in the past few years.

DPW: How do you think that the businesses were affected by the depression?

LL: Well, they were pretty hard hit, they didn’t sell too much and they didn’t make much off of what they did sell. The prices were so cheap, the businesses a lot them, well the grocery stores, of course, ya always had to have groceries and you had to have some clothing, but there weren’t very few stores, of course, the population wasn’t the great then as it is now either, the population has increased so much the last few years it—we had to have a lot more stores. Most of the stores were supplying what the people needed, but they never made a lot of money, there just wasn’t much margin in it.

Everybody was about in the same boat; they were just barely getting by and taking care of their families and soon quite a few people went broke, during the depression, lots of farmers lost their land, and some businesses went broke—lost what they had. It was a tough situation, there were just too many people unemployed, and that didn’t have anything. Farmers couldn’t pay their bills. Along in 1932 when Roosevelt went in, they started what they call the WPA, Works Administration, some kind of work program. They hired lots of farmers to go out and clean ditch banks, cut willows, rift raft rivers, do all kinds of projects, you know, to give them something to do. They didn’t pay them much, but they gave them something to make a few dollars, because there were a lot of farmers that just weren’t able to pay bills. A lot of city people didn’t have anything to eat, so they started a lot of these projects.

They had men all over the country working on these WPA jobs, so the government would give them a little money to take care of their families on, but it was really rough because there were men out of work every place and they just didn’t have anything to feed their families on, but they did give them something to do. I can remember lots of canal banks cleared of willows. They had men actually go out and cut them, cut the willows. They had a lot of different projects; they actually had men work so they could give them some money.

DPW: Do you think that there was any one particular group that benefited at all, or the most, from the depression?

LL: Well, I don’t know who it’d be. Banks went broke. Lots of banks rolls broke, closed their doors. We had two banks in Rigby, both of them closed up, lost all they had. Stock holders lost all of what they had, depositors lost what little they had. I don’t know of anyone that got through with hardly anything left after the depression. The schools were in bad shape. Many of the school districts couldn’t pay their school teachers. They issued warrants, they’d issue a warrant then somebody would buy these warrants, then hold them ‘til the state could collect enough taxes to pay for these warrants. For several years the school teachers never got a check, they just got a warrant; it was a piece of paper drawn on the county saying that when the funds were available, they would pay them.

So there was different places that bought these warrants and held them of course, they’d collect interest on them. School teachers couldn’t get their money, no one had anything, and it was really rough. You just wouldn’t realize, unless you’ve gone through
it, what a depression was. There wasn’t anything for people to do there. There just wasn’t any money for the people to pay for the things they needed. There were a lot of families that had a hard time keeping food on their table.

DPW: By that, do you mean that some people went hungry?

LL: I wouldn’t doubt that, a lot of people were going hungry. I don’t know where they got their food. The government did not hand out some in some cases; I’ve heard where they had places where they gave out food. A lot of people, take for example a widow family, well she had some boys that were old enough to work. The widow had an awful hard time feeding her family. They didn’t have any state aid. The church helped them out a little, but they just had a hard time finding something to eat.

DPW: What was the general opinion of the public toward the government during the depression?

LL: Well, I can’t say for sure, I was just a young fellow. I heard lots of people talk, and lots of stories. A lot of people condemned the party, the Republicans; they blamed them for the depression. They blamed them for everything. So in 1932 they just gave landslides to the Democratic Party. They put them in, and Roosevelt did try, of course, he had a little better situation. He had a majority of—in his house of senate. He had a lot of ideas, and of course he put them into effect, and they did help the country a great deal. They started moving a little. They started gaining a little money, and circulating it in the various projects which they had. They had those things coming along pretty good, then the war came along in 1940 to 41 of course, the war started prior to that time, that’s when we started furnishing materials to these places then things really started to boom. Then when we entered the war things just skyrocketed. We went into the war in December 1941, when we were attached by Pearl Harbor. Then of course, wages really went up, things changed a lot. I went to work for Boise Pette in 1936 I got $80 a month for twelve months of the year. I worked from 7 in the morning to 6 at night, six days a week. That was quite a bit. We thought we were out of the depression then, and wages were still only $80 a month. I worked whole year for $80 a month, one year for $90 a month, then I got $100 a month the third year.

DPW: Was there any violence or heavy criminal acts?

LL: Oh yes, there’s always been that, the mobs were in force, see we had prohibition for a long while and there was bootlegging going on, a lot of these mobs were warring one with another. These gangsters in Chicago, they had all kinds of problems. It wasn’t so much like it is now. We didn’t have so much of the whites and blacks fighting, it was just gangsters. Al Capone and some of these guys got control of some of the certain areas, and they’d war one with another, they’d rob the people. We had plenty of violence in those days for as many people as there was.

DPW: What was the relation between the mobs and the depression?
LL: Well, I don’t know if they made it worse, or if it was the cause of the mobs or not. The mobs did become quite powerful in these times, why the gangsters controlled different areas, and did their bootlegging and their stealing, they were promoting all kinds of vice to make money, and I guess they made a lot of money, some of these gangsters became wealthy, according to the papers.

Most of the people were willing to work; they wanted to work if they could find something to do. For several years there sure wasn’t much for a man to do. The farmer couldn’t hire him because he didn’t make anything. The factories in the cities closed down, and so those men came out and tried to find work in different rural areas, with all the city people out of work everybody was roaming around here and there trying to find work. And then about this time too there was drought in the mid-west Oklahoma and Texas and through that they just couldn’t raise a crop, several years they didn’t have any moisture. So a lot of these people went to the coast, to California and other places trying to find places to live and work and pick up something to eat, something that they would live on. Those were really tough times, the Okies (Oklahoma’s) left that area and went west, mother nature was really rough on them, so much of that area was dependent on rain, they just didn’t have any rain for a number of years, so a lot of these people left, people in the south they tried to find something to do because they couldn’t raise any crops.

DPW: What do you think was the most effective thing done by President Roosevelt to solve these problems?

LL: Well, he started a lot of projects to employ men, this was quite similar to what it was in the days of the Egyptians Pharaohs, these Pharaohs built these great Pyramids and employed thousands of people, and they did that to employ people. Here we did about the same thing they had work projects; they found any kind of work possible that they could get to do. Why the government would hire and pay these people to do it, then of course, this helped get money into circulation. Then when the people had money they could spend, why then, of course, it helped all these other businesses.

I started into the lumber business in 1936 and a lot of these projects were just on then. The government helped build school buildings and things like that. It helped move materials, and helped men to get to work, and so it helped everybody. See then of course, when the prices of farm produce went up a little, why then that helped a lot. But they had to do something to give men something to do, so they could get money into circulation, so they started a lot of these projects, the government helped build new school houses and several other buildings, of course, it helped buy materials and employed men for labor, it helped things to start moving.

DPW: What about neighboring countries did they do anything to help the United States?

LL: I couldn’t say I don’t know of anything that was done. I don’t remember reading anything about it. I think that a lot of the other countries were in about the same condition we were in. I think their standard of living was very low. I went into Mexico in 1930, no it was in 1929, things were really rough down there. The people didn’t have any money. People there lived in poverty, what little I saw of it. They were in bad shape, the Mexican
dollar wasn’t any good, and they were having tough time maintaining money. So they didn’t have anything to buy with, sorry I don’t know anything about many of the other countries.

DPW: 1929 to 30 was about the time Hitler was coming into power. Do you think this his threat could have put pressure on the people lives, the nations economy?

LL: Well, we didn’t hear about him until later in the 30s of course, they started war over there in about 1938 to 39, I’m sure we benefited from that because we helped furnish the allies with a lot of materials and stuff that put a lot of our factories to work doing things, I don’t know exactly when Hitler first started up. I don’t remember anything about him ‘til along in 1936, 37, 38 along in there.

We first started hearing about him here. He had some funny ideas about a lot of things, but I guess he did create a lot work and a lot of employment over there as he built up his forces.

DPW: About what year do you think that the United States started to recover from the depression?

LL: Well, I’m sure we started, well let’s see ’33 was really rough. 1934 to 35 Roosevelt really started working, and by 1936 things were looking a little bit better then they had been. Prior to that time you see he wasn’t in the office, he was elected in November ’32, and of course, he took office in January 33 and by 34-45 he started a lot of these projects a going and by 36 I thought things were quite a bit better than what they had been. I know they were a lot better than they had been.

DPW: So then Roosevelt was elected for three terms, wasn’t he?

LL: I think he was elected for four times.

DPW: Four times?

LL: I think so if I remember right. I know when he was elected the third time, see no president was elected more than twice before in the history of the US. Then when he finished that I think he was elected the fourth time, then he died shortly after that. If I remember my history right, I’d have to check for sure, but I think he was elected the fourth time.

DPW: Three or four times, that’s quite a bit.

LL: I know. There was so much controversy when he ran the third time see, then I’m sure he ran once more after that. Then he dies in office.

DPW: So he was quite a popular president?
LL: Oh yes, he was quite a man. He did lot of things that some people didn’t like, but he at least got things moving, got the country going the other way.

DPW: I guess you can’t please all the people all the time.

LL: Oh no, I’m sure of that. I don’t know how long we would have stayed in those conditions if we didn’t have someone to take hold like he did. We’ve had depressions off and on; history seems to repeat itself about every ten to twelve years. We’d have a rise and a lowering, but in 1930 it went down lower than it had ever gone before, much worse that it had been. Oh, I guess in the 1800s a time or two the United States was in pretty bad shape, we just read about that, but when we’ve gone through this other its really something. But since then, we’ve stayed on top now for so long that if it breaks again, I’m afraid it’s going to be rough.

DPW: We’ll need another Roosevelt won’t we?

LL: We’re going to have something, I’m afraid it’s going to be really rough because so many people are so use to so much now. That is if we start giving some of these up it’s going to be really hard.

DPW: When do you think the depression was completely over with and we did not go back to it?

LL: Well, I don’t know just when 36 to 37, well when you say completely over when we went into the war in 1941 why things began to boom and it was a boom instead of just a normal period. Of course, from ’41 from then to ’46 it was nothing but a boom. Everything just blew out of proportion; we’ve never had anything like this part of the year or two though, we’ve had higher prices for farm produce in the last year or two then we’ve ever had in fact higher everything. Machinery and everything is so much higher than ever before in the history of the United States.

DPW: But I guess wages are up higher too?

LL: Yes, wages are up higher. Everything you buy is higher considerably. The costs, I just can hardly believe it. When you think that a Chevrolet automobile sells for $5,000 it’s hard to believe. We bought several of them for less than a $1,000. I’ve paid over $5,000 for that same kind of car. Of course, these are a lot better cars than what we had in those days too. The roads and everything else are so much better. When you travel around all over the United States you see these oil highways we’ve got every place you go there’s been a lot of improvement, a lot of changing.

DPW: How did you think your family came through the depression?

LL: Well, we all learned how to work, we learned how to save, and we never had a lot of money like a lot of people, who became wealthy in less than ten years.
DPW: I see. You’ve got a nice home here.

LL: We’ve done alright, we raised a family, we all learned to work and save a few things. We also have to plan and to have enough to go on.

DPW: So I guess in some ways a man could have benefited from the depression?

LL: I’m sure a lot of the old people learned a lot of things; they learned how to get by on a lot fewer things. Children, well they just got together and had a lot of fun in the afternoon with very little of anything, may be a ball of some kind, some kind of a mitt, a lot of time they didn’t have mitts. They learned to play and to get along, enjoy themselves. We never had to go to a movie or any of the things we have today. We had a lot of good times without these kinds of things.

DPW: I suppose we could still do that if we tried.

LL: That’s right, we could. A little girl that I was talking to the other day says to me, “Do you know how to play Fox and Geese?” I said, “Sure we played Fox and Geese lots of times.” I said, “Our kids don’t even know anything about it, they don’t even dare to get in the snow.” We spent a lot of time in the afternoons playing Fox and Geese in the snow, it didn’t take anything, not anything at all. You get a circle in the snow and start running. So we were able to do without anything we have now. So many kind now have to have a TV to sit in from of, they don’t know what to do with themselves. If the TV’s out, why they wouldn’t know how to do what to do with themselves. It used to be that all you had to do was get together and play and do a lot of things, we didn’t sit in front of a TV.

DPW: I guessed that is all I had, unless you wanted to say a little more?

LL: I know when we went to Ricks we didn’t have any money, but of course, it didn’t cost much to go. We didn’t have anything to go on but we always had a good time. We worked hard, played hard, studied hard, and had a good time while we were here. I know when we only had one coach; we always come home with trophies in football, basketball, and track. We competed with all the other schools, ISU, Weber State, all the Montana schools, guys came down from Albin and Boise State; we competed with all those schools. Of course, they were all junior colleges at that time, most of them were. Didn’t go to be a four year until after awhile. We competed with all of those. Things are quite different now, athletics are quite different now. When you see the equipment Ricks has got, why you wouldn’t believe it. We used much difference equipment when we were there. We bought our won track shoes, but they furnished the suits, things are sure different. We furnished our own shoes, but things are sure different. You see all those cars parked around now, why back in those days, there were may be one or two that came to school. Of course, it was much smaller than it is now. Then we only had three or four hundred students, now we have 5,000 it’s quite a difference.

I’m glad I had the experience of going through the depression, learning to get by on what we did, we appreciate what we got now a lot more than we would have done if we’d had everything when were kids.
DPW: Thank you very much Brother Luke, this tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researches.

LL: Well, if it’s any good to them, I’m glad to do it.