

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

Luseba W. Petersen – Experiences of the Depression

By Luseba Widdison Petersen

March 24, 1976

Box 2 Folder 23

Oral Interview conducted by Rick Smith

Transcribed by Maren Miyasaki

November 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

RS: My name is Rick Smith. Today is March 24, 1976. I'm going to interview Sister Luseba Petersen. The topic of the discussion will be the Depression of Idaho. Mrs. Petersen, where were you born?

LP: I was born in Plano, in Fremont County, at that time, Idaho, about ten miles outside of Rexburg.

RS: How long have you lived in Rexburg?

LP: Practically all my life. We were going to the University of Utah for two years. We spent two years in California while my husband went to Stanford University, and then we were away from here three years while we presided over the Cumorah Mission in the state of New York.

RS: Where were your parents born?

LP: My mother was born in the same house that I was born in; and my father was born in Salt Lake City, but his people immigrated to the upper Snake River Valley early in its settlement. My mother's people came here about the time that the Ricks people came to colonize Rexburg. My grandfather on my mother's side had taken wagon loads of supplies from Corinne, Utah up into Montana, up at Butte. That was his occupation until a sort of a freighter. One time as he was coming from Butte he passed out from Camas, and he went out in the sagebrush many miles out east where the Egin Bench is now, the finest potato growing section in the state of Idaho. He decided that he would take up a homestead there, and so he took up his farm and that's where the family lives and the farm is still in the family, one of the very finest farms in Egin Bench.

RS: Could you tell me a little about the Depression in Idaho?

LP: Well I, the Depression in Idaho I think perhaps was different than it was in many parts of the United States because most of the people lived in this area of the states were self employed, that is they had their land or their cattle or sheep or both, all of them and they helped each other. They largely settled here because of the church, and the church helped them help each other. Hard times came before the crash really came, so people here really didn't exactly know when the Depression came because we had crop failures for a number of years. I would say three or four, just guessing, when there wasn't much money coming into the families. Now I was a girl, unmarried. I lived in Hibbard and I was attending high school at Ricks normal college, and then I stayed on and went to college there. We didn't have much money, but we did have plenty of the necessities of life. We always had a comfortable home, not elaborate but it was warm. We always had plenty to eat. My father had sheep and cattle, and everybody raised pigs for quick meat. Everybody had a little chicken coop even though they lived in town. They would have at least a cow to milk. If they didn't have a cow, their neighbor would have a cow; and sometimes they would exchange vegetables for milk and sometimes they would provide enough garden stuff to give their neighbors. But nearly everybody made their own butter, had their own cream, plenty of whipping cream, and my mother used to make cheese. When the cows were in high production, she would make cheese like our good old fashioned American Cheddar cheese, and raised all kinds of vegetables. Most people had a root cellar, and in the fall it was filled with enough potatoes to last the people to the next harvest time. People who didn't raise their own

potatoes were able to go out and pick up potatoes from some other neighbors or get potatoes from someplace. But they usually had enough potatoes, and carrots, and onions, sacks of cabbage. They would store in the fall and in the spring they used to look at the cabbage and think it would be rotten, it would be so black that when those outside leaves would be peeled off there would be that beautiful white cabbage ready to eat and full of juice. So we had plenty of vegetables, and most people had their own meat and raised their own fruit as much as they could. This country has never been a great apple producing country. There were always people in the valley who raised apples. If we couldn't afford to buy them off the trees we would get permission to go pick them up after the windfalls and cull out the bruised spots and make apple sauce and [apple] butter and we'd make our jams.

I remember one year during the Depression, we were on the [dry] farm and there were not many raspberries, but we found a place on a creek that had a lot of wild gooseberries. When they were ripe [they] were black, just as black as they could be. We put several hundred quarts of wild gooseberries and they were delicious. We would pick wild serviceberries and wild chokecherries; we'd bottle our fruit. We always had fruit. Although it was not fresh as we refer to oranges and bananas, we didn't have that sort of fruit. We bottled our fruit, and we would have a bottle of fruit for breakfast and a bottle of fruit for dinner with a piece of cake, another bottle of fruit at night with cookies or something of that sort. So as far as food is concerned, we were not hit very hard. We had a good living, and our clothes, we couldn't afford to buy much clothing. Nearly every farmer had a few milk cows that they depended on for their cash income. We would separate the milk. There were no creameries that came out and gathered up the milk, but we would separate our cream, and then once a week we would bring that cream into the creamery. We called them creameries, and they would pay us so much a pound according to the content of butterfat in the cream, we would be paid. And from that cash we would buy what little groceries we needed, little extras like baking soda, salt, and spices, and the little extras that we had brought from the grocery store. This little cream check would buy shirts for the boys and cloth for the girls to make their dresses out of, and our parents' were very frugal, they would make over [clothes]. I remember my mother used to make over the overcoats, of the good overcoats, that were worn out for the men. She would wash them and iron them and press them up and make them like new. She would make overcoats and jackets and blazers for the boys. The girls, we all had made over dresses. We'd sometimes buy a little bit of trimming or a card of buttons that might cost ten cents, but they were good buttons and they would brighten up a dress.

So we had poor crops preceding the crash. I remember after the crash, I had a brother [that] my father was keeping in England on a mission and he came to our place. One day, he had four horses on a wagon, and it was all those four horses could pull, to pull that big wagon full of grain over to the elevator. When he came back he was so happy because that was enough to keep my brother for one month. I believe that it brought him about 30 or 35 dollars for that big load of grain. Well, at the beginning of hard times, I married. I had finished school and met my husband who had finished his mission and had gone out to Hibbard where I lived to teach school, and I taught school at Lyman. Well, at that time, it was just something unheard of to have a married man go to school, but we decided that we could borrow a little money if we had too. We had made arrangements for that. So we went down to the University of Utah and lived there for two years. And of course, before we left, I can't tell you how many hundred bottles of vegetables and fruit we took with us from here. They were canned, and we intended to live on that, supplemented of course with the food we could get in Salt Lake. But it was during this period of two years that the crash came, and the Depression was really felt all over the world. It

was felt much more in Salt Lake City than it was here in Idaho. Now we were very close to Idaho because this was our home, and we knew what was going on here. To give you a little idea of what prices were, we went to Salt Lake and rented a little home. It had one bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen, pantry, and we paid ten dollars a month for that. And they gave us a month's rent if we would paint the inside, which it badly needed. We didn't have a cook stove, so we went down to a secondhand store and bought a very nice looking cook stove that we burnt coal in, and we paid five dollars for that cook stove. The few other pieces of furniture that we had we took from here little odds and ends that my husband's people had left and so forth and so on. We made our little bookcases out of orange crates and boxes and bricks and other things, but we had a comfortable little home. Then we moved a few blocks away later on, and this house had a living room that could be converted into a living room and a bedroom. We had a little couch that we could make a bed out of. We had a friend here in Rexburg that was going down to the University of Utah, and he was not married. But he was going down here on a shoelace like the rest of us, and so we decided that we could make up a bed in the living room and he could sleep there, and we would feed him, and he could live with us. And we charged him ten dollars a month for his room and board. Surprisingly enough it helped us out a little bit on our food bill. Bread was three loaves for a dime, but you didn't get very much money if you were working. My husband had to work as much as he could. He was taking a heavy course in school and, of course, school was the most important thing. I remember I went to a dressmaking and tailoring college, and my father and mother paid for the tuition to this dressmaking and tailoring college. And I graduated from that. But other than that I didn't go to the University.

But my husband used to get off work at the University about three o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, and he'd go to work for Safeway, and he'd work from three o'clock in the afternoon on Friday until Friday night, eleven or twelve o'clock. Now that was when they stocked the shelves and when the customer did not pick out his merchandise. We gave his list to the clerk, and the clerk had to put it in a box and fix it up for the customer. So they had to do all this work and the cleaning up the store and everything after the customers quit coming in. And then on Saturday morning, he would go to work at seven o'clock in the morning and get off at eleven or twelve o'clock Saturday night. When we first went to Salt Lake, when he first got that job, we felt so lucky because one week he would get three dollars for his Friday afternoon, Friday night, and Saturday afternoon, and Saturday night's work. The next week he would get four dollars, so that makes seven dollars in two weeks. I remember at the end of the first month that was not very much money to pay tithing with, but we paid our little tiny bit of tithing all the time. But it gave us a little job and that's the only job he had. I can remember we liked Libby's Red Alaska Salmon, and we could get a can of that for nineteen cents. About a year ago here in Rexburg, it was about four dollars and seventy-nine cents a can or something of that nature.

But even then, at nineteen cents a can, that was expensive because of the money that was coming in. Money was hard to get. And I remember reading in the papers about the crash and the starvation and the sickness and things of that sort in the larger cities. While we were in Salt Lake, we lived across the street from a large apartment house on the west side in Salt Lake. It was really pitiful to see a lot of men, they were men who had been employed, generally speaking by the railroad. And of course, some of their jobs expired. They didn't have work, and then there was the class of people that would go from one place to another and stop there hoping to find work in the wintertime. They would flock to these apartment houses that were heated by little coal stoves, and they didn't have money enough to buy a lump of coal to keep them warm, they didn't have money enough to buy food. We lived about a half a block from the growers'

market and often we'd go over to the growers' market early in the morning and, of course, in the summertime we could get our vegetables cheaper [there] than in the grocery store. But sometimes they would have sweet potatoes that were not marketable; they would have little spots, spoil spots in them. But we found out, and they'd throw them on the ground, but we found out that if we'd pick them up before they got wet and trimmed the spoiled spot off that they wouldn't rot anymore. So we could keep a sweet potato two or three weeks. We could get that for nothing, but we still had good food. In Salt Lake, we had our milk delivered to our home. And [I] made bread, and we lived on what we had. We had a little ice-cream freezer, it held a quart. We could buy ten cents worth of ice and take the top off a couple of quarts of milk and make [a] nice freezer of ice-cream. We always had plenty of dessert, plenty of good food. We were very fortunate.

When graduation time came at the university, many of the people that were graduating in the class that my husband was in just couldn't find jobs. Employment was hard to get, and wages were so low, and they didn't have money enough to get out of Salt Lake City. But it was down at conference and a very fine teacher from Ricks College saw us down to conference and asked my husband if he had a job. He said, "No, I don't have a job." And he said, "Why don't you go and apply for a seminary job. There's vacancies up in our country, they're opening them up." And so my husband went up to see Apostle Joseph F. Merrill, he had an interview with him, and he said, "Why don't you come back on Wednesday." And so my husband went back on Wednesday and Apostle Merrill says that, "I've been expecting you, why haven't you been here before?" My husband didn't know what to think. He told him that in their meeting with the quorum of the twelve apostles, they had decided that he had been hired. Now he said, "Where do you want to go? Do you want to go north or do you want to go south?" Well, my husband said, "Well, we live north, so we would like to go north." So he said, "There are two places: one at Driggs and one at Sugar City. Which place would you like to go to?" Well my husband said that "I'd rather go to Sugar City." And so we had a job and we came back to Rexburg and lived in my husband's father's house. We paid him rent. That was in the day that the seminary teacher had to live where he taught. But we were living in Rexburg and he was teaching in Sugar City, but the stake president said that was alright because you are in the same stake.

So we were happy to have a job and especially a job where we had a home, where we could come to, and we had a nice big garden spot. About the first thing we did was buy a milk cow so we'd have our milk, butter, and cream. We thought this was a wonderful thing. I didn't know what a depression was, and I don't know whether my husband did or not. But we heard all over about this depression, but it looked pretty good to us to have a job. We've been without a job for two years and here in Salt Lake we've seen all these people without jobs. And by the way, we lived in the stake in Salt Lake where President Harold B. Lee was stake president, and he was really the man who started church welfare. He started it. He was given permission by the presidency of the church to carry out his plan within the stake. And we saw the exercise of this plan in the very beginning when we came up here and there was nothing said about welfare. But it wasn't long until the welfare program, because of the Depression, was advocated throughout the church. And after we had been here a year or two years, the general thing is that your wages are increased, but here we were in the middle of a deep depression. And every year, for a number of years, my husband's salary was cut back, cut back. Everyone's salary was cut back, cut back. And then when they started to increase the salary, it would only come back maybe five dollars a year, ten dollars a year, little bit. And so we had a little money, but things were hard. Many of the farmers around here lost their farms. Not because they had overspent or

been unwise, but there just wasn't enough money to pay taxes and to pay for perhaps the machinery or hay or whatever they needed. They just didn't have the cash and many of the farm people, as well as just the families with homes, lost their homes just because they didn't have a little bit of money to carry them over.

However, I think in this valley, business men and people in general went as far as they could. They extended their credit if they could. But many a good family lost valuable property. Some of them were able to move and make a new start, but it was hard. But as far as people being able to say they really suffered, [there was] not a lot of suffering for a want of clothing, food, or shelter in this part of Idaho. Now I can't speak for the larger centers, but this part of Idaho was largely family oriented and church oriented. People helped each other out. If one family had a few more beans than they needed, they saw to it that some family without green beans would have enough to fill their bottles, and they helped each other out. And the same was true with milk and raspberries. Many people would have a raspberry patch lots larger than they needed for themselves, but they would sell their raspberries or let some of their family pick them on shares. And [I] remember we used to sell raspberries for twelve quarts for a dollar. Picked, picked the raspberries and get twelve full quarts for a dollar. People, of course, that was good fruit, it was lovely. But that was the value of the product at that time.

Speaking of cloth, my mother-in-law lived in California during the Depression, and as my children were coming along she would often go to sellouts or stores where they were clearing the merchandise, and she would send me bundles of cloth that she would pay no more than five cents a yard. And we would make that into aprons and dresses and everything. I made the little boys shirts and underclothing, and we used to get chicken feed in a bag, a printed bag, and we'd make dresses out of those mash bags and flour sacks were all saved. Sometimes we'd dye them and make quilts or quilt linings. Sometimes we would take the flour bag itself and wash it, and bleach it up, and make under clothing, pajamas, trim the little boys' pajamas with a piece of percale. They made beautiful clothes and yet they didn't cost a penny because we had the bags, and the scraps that they were trimmed with were scraps that were saved from other sewing materials, and so many of our clothes didn't cost us anything, only the thread. But people had to be wise, and I think people in this part of the country were pretty well trained in how to take care of things. We didn't have a lot of places to run around. I mentioned yesterday that I lived in Hibbard and my husband lived in Burton, and I never knew of the name until he came home from his mission, and I was going up to the college, but he went out to my home town to teach. But people didn't go four miles away; we didn't go there to ride around. If we had a relative, and we'd go to see our relatives, but we didn't see the general public. About the only time we saw people from other vicinities in this county would be when we came to Stake Quarterly Conference and our association that way.

I mentioned a couple of stories (to Rick) yesterday that I had forgotten about and one was, when we came back here in the midst of the Depression and we had a job, we used to go uptown and do our shopping. And I don't know and my husband worked at Safeway up here too. And I know he often said that you can't carry five dollars worth of groceries out of the grocery store in one trip, there is just no way you can do it. There would be a sack of flour, ham, whatever you had, but you could not carry five, one man could not carry five dollars worth of groceries out of the grocery store. We didn't have refrigerators, but in the wintertime we could keep meat, if it was out in the air. We had a little shanty that we could lock, but it was cold out there and we could keep meat. And on Saturday they would often run a special, every Saturday was the same up at Bishop Wright's meat market. And you could get ten pounds of beef, any

kind you wanted, for a dollar. You could get it mixed, you could have two pounds of hamburger, you could have ribs, you could have all steaks, you could have it all cut up into roast, two roasts, or as many roasts as you wanted. Now our family was not very large, we had three little children, but a dollar would buy all the meat we'd use in all the different varieties for a whole week. We could even invite our friends in for dinner and do all with that one purchase of meat, and it was delicious meat. Eggs, I remember we didn't have eggs the whole year round. But about this time, some people who were having a hard time with their farms or otherwise, were going into scientific poultry raising and they seemed to do, it was the beginning of them getting help out of the Depression. But the general run of people who had just a little chicken coop, our chickens didn't lay all year round. We'd keep them because they'd give us chicken to eat for Sunday. And in the spring and during the summer, they usually produced eggs sufficient for our family; we had all the eggs we wanted. But when they started laying in the spring and eggs were scarce, I remember the children used to take an egg to the store, and if they could get five cents for an egg when eggs were really hard to get, boy, that was a lot. Five cents, that was sixty cents a dozen. And that was a big income to sell one egg for five cents. Of course, they're not much more than that now, but we can have all the eggs we want now, but then it was hard to get eggs. Nearly everybody in town had a little pig pen where they could raise a pork or two, cure their meat, or something like that. They took care of their meat needs even if they were not in the production of cattle or sheep and so forth. But we had plenty of food.

Now I was also asked to tell a story of a family who lived some miles from the church house. We were in the old Second Ward. My husband was bishop during the Depression, and there were more widows living in our ward than in all the rest of the stake put together. But this family did not happen to be a family without a father and mother. It was a family with quite a few children and the father's brother's wife had died and left four children. So this family, which was already large, opened their arms and took these four motherless children into their home and fed them. I don't know, they were what we called on welfare. They got most of their money from the government, most of their food from the government, and their clothing. But they were very religious, very, very devout Latter-Day Saints. They were always to church, they came 100 percent to Sunday school unless one of [them] was sick, 100 percent to Sacrament meeting, and MIA, and Primary, and Relief Society. You could always depend on this family. There was not a member of the family who could afford a pair of rubbers. And they lived out across the railroad track, across the river. They didn't have any means of transportation: no horse, no car, but they were always to church. And the mother and father would carry the little children on their back. Sometimes they would cross the river on the ice. And in the spring when the ice started to melt, and it would get so they couldn't cross the river, they'd have to go up the river a little ways and walk on the rails of the railroad track across the river and then walk into church. I have no idea of how much the father made. I don't suppose it was more than twenty-five to thirty dollars a month even when he had work. But they were such faithful people. I never knew how much they paid in tithing, but I'm sure they paid an honest tithing because every week that mother came to church with a few coins tied up in her handkerchief. Now at that time, nobody took tithing except the bishop. He receipted all the tithing, all the fast offerings, and everything. But sometimes she would slip that tightly knotted handkerchief in my hand and say give this to the bishop. And I would give it to him knowing it was her tithing. You don't come close to paying an honest tithing, you either miss it a long ways or it's full honest tithing. I often used to think that surely they can do something to help themselves out. But I didn't understand that this was a depression, this was a time when if you couldn't supply work

for yourself and had something coming in, it was almost impossible to have money. But this family have grown, and often when I go to the temple, I see the children and the grandchildren.

Another incident that I will retell is, at the beginning of the Depression there were many transient people that would, would come through the country here at harvest time, and haying time, and at planting time. And the farmers that didn't have family members to carry on their work, would go down the street on the bank corner and find some of these transient people and hire them to go out and help them with their work. I remember my parents had come down from the dry farm, which was up on the bench, and we were putting up hay on the wet farm and my father had hired a number of these transient men to help with the hay. We had been down the valley only a few days when my mother and father had business in town to take care of. So my mother said that I would have to prepare supper for these people, and they were working hard, they'll need a good supper. So I proceeded to start early and prepare supper. I had my brothers and sisters there with me; I was to take care of them. One of these transient men was up on the hay stack, he was stacking the hay, and it was right near the house. We had a work table out by our coal shed where we used to do our dirty work, we didn't have running water in the house or anything. So I was peeling potatoes out on this work table, it was right close to the pump, and this man who was stacking hay had to wait for a load of hay to come in. So he came over to where I was and said, "Miss, can I help you peel your potatoes?" And I said, "Oh no, I can peel them." But he took his pocketknife out of his pocket, went over to the pump and washed it off good, and proceeded to help me peel the potatoes. And I was very much concerned, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to offend the man, but I had my suspicions. So I put the potatoes on when he got through helping me and prepared the rest of the supper. And when it came time for the men to quit work they washed and came in the house to eat. But I was sure to gather my brothers and sisters and I said, "Now don't you dare eat a bit of that supper because that man had helped peel the potatoes." And I had heard of spies and things in the United States and, of course, that was the thing that I was afraid of. And I saw to it that they didn't eat. Well, the next year, the same man came back to town and walked out to my father's farm to see if he could get a job in the hay, and so he was a good worker, my father hired him again. But I was always suspicious of him.

RS: Thank you, Sister Petersen. This tape and the manuscript will be kept in the library at Ricks College for further use by researchers. Thank you very much.