

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

# Marcine Pierson – Experiences of the Depression

By Marcine Pierson

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## Box 2 Folder 26

Oral Interview conducted by Mark Hopkins

Transcribed by Maren Miyasaki      November 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

MH: My name is Mark Hopkins. Today is April 1, 1974, and I am going to interview Mrs. Darwin Pierson. The general topic will be the Depression of Idaho.

MP: The high school graduations then were not like now because many did not graduate from high school. They were starting to go on to high school more. They had a regular graduation ceremony, and I wanted a new dress so bad and my dad and mother figured it up, and there was just no way they could buy a dress. There just was no money. We lived on a farm, so we ate, you know. We had food although there was no big variety. So we always had food, but we just did not buy things that had to be bought. I wanted it so bad, and I prayed so hard for it. I guess my folks heard me praying so hard. I guess they figured they had better do something. My mother took orders for gooseberries. We had a big garden, and so she took orders for gooseberries, and the people paid her, and she got 69 cents, and we ordered out of the Montgomery Ward catalog, my graduation dress for 69 cents; and then in the summer I picked gooseberries to pay for it. But, I think perhaps the most heartbreaking thing on that not having money to buy clothes. I had a little brother who was four years old; and ever since he was old enough to talk, he wanted a pair of bib overalls and a shirt like my father's. At the time they each cost 49 cents each, and you could buy a pair of coveralls that snapped and buttoned up the front for 59 cents, and so in figuring we did not have to buy the shirt and the bib overalls, which he would need would be 98 cents; when for 59 cents we could get the coveralls, so he was always told someday you can have overalls and a shirt like daddy has. But, now all we can afford is coveralls, and he was killed in an accident when he was four, and my father insisted he be buried in a shirt and a pair of overalls, because that's what he want all of his life. So that was the principle thing I remember.

It didn't seem hard times to us. We had parties and taffy pulls. When you had company over, you fed them oyster stew, and that's the kind of things you did. You did things that were very, very inexpensive. My dad was a sheep man and it was like the shoemakers' kids shoes. We lived for the day when we could afford to have a lamb to eat. That was a luxury at that time, roast lamb, and we always had to sell ours because there were taxes to be paid and those kinds of things. We had a car, but they were not used like they are now. You, the whole family figured out what they needed and usually my parents went to town once a week and did the shopping; and of course, they drove it to church, but of course there was no driving to visit anybody. That kind of thing, and you, the life was in our home, and the things we grew. We had chickens, so we had eggs, and we had meat, and we had our gardens, and we lived off those things. Money was probably the only thing we did without.

MH: What did you do to relax?

MP: Our recreation was the M.I.A. put on plays, and you went to that, and you went to your church meetings; and at that time, I only knew two people who were not LDS. Two families in this whole area were not LDS. And, the church was our social life. There was no social life other than that. At that time later, as things got better, why we went to a movie, something of this kind. But, during the hard years the church and the neighbors coming over, were the only social life there was.

We would run errands for my grandmother. She lived close to the school; and they had no money either. We'd do errands for her and for payment we would get an egg to go to the store with, and we could get anywhere from three cents to five cents worth of candy. A nickel's

worth of candy was an enormous amount of candy. It would last you all week, and we would get depending on the price of eggs three cents to five cents worth of candy at the store, when we took the egg to the store. Those were real special events. We got an orange for Christmas, and that was the only time of the year that we ever got an orange. Our apple trees were seasoned, but there was no chance of going into a store and buying fresh vegetables. We could hardly wait 'til spring. We just lived on what we canned in the garden and the potatoes and the meat that we had. So the first thing in the Spring was the rhubarb and the horse radishes, and how good they tasted because they were fresh and had a different flavor than canned fruit.

MH: What was the area like around Ammon in the Thirties?

MP: We lived on our farm here. We lived right next to the foothills on a farm about four miles from here. After you left the town site of Ammon, which I don't know how many houses there were; about 30 or 40 houses here in Ammon. After you left the town site of Ammon 'til you got to Idaho Falls, there were three houses that you could see. In the winter, we always went to town. All of the neighbors get together and went to town in the horse and sleigh. And, it would be dark by the time we came back. It got darker early. From Idaho Falls to the town site we would see the lights of three houses. It was a dark, cold, scary ride for a little kid.

MH: I know that my folks talk about the work they used to do back then, about how they would put in 12 to 14 hours a day and then that night would go dancing, and this kind of stuff in the community. I was just wondering, how your father worked and played?

MP: They had done that before, by the time that I was this age they had gotten a big family and they had gone past this age, but when they were first married why it was like either the school or the church was the entire recreation. They sponsored it all, the PTA did. For instance, a banquet every year honoring the founding of the PTA. It cost one penny per serving then. Everything cost a penny. You had vegetable which was worth a penny. They always went to those, as I said, when they just had a couple of kids and were younger. They usually bundled the kids up and they took them to the dance. And, they just wrapped them in quilts. The kids would go to sleep right there and would be laid in one corner of the floor, one corner of the floor all the kids would sleep, and the parents danced and had a good time. There was no thought of hiring a babysitter. The kids went with you. Another thing we had of which was throughout in this area, was traveling groups which would put on shows. They were like vaudeville. They had acts that went on between play acts. They had three-act plays and they'd have acts that went on between the acts. When they came which was once or twice a year that was a real treat. The admission was about 10 cents for the adults and three cents for the kids. That was a real treat if you could all go to that. If you went to sleep it didn't make any difference. The kids were taken to the back and laid on a bench and slept and were taken home. It was all inexpensive recreation, and we saved up to have the 10 cents to go to those shows.

MH: Was there any kind of crime in this part of the area at the time? It seems like now if there was a depression there would be a lot of crime.

MP: Well, I don't think, I wasn't old enough. We all heard stories of town drunks and we feared one day we would meet him. You know every town has one. And we all heard stories about

him, and I was horrified, but I was 16 before I had ever saw a person intoxicated. It was a different world then what it is today. But, I feel bad today about what they call juvenile delinquency because what they call delinquency now, we did all the time. That was our recreation, but people expected it if we went over to the neighbor's tree to steal apples. If we were caught, he would whip the daylights out of us and send us home. It was part of the game. There was no such thing as calling the law. We used to have chickarees as we got a little older. That's when you would swipe a chicken and take it over to one of the girl's house and cook him and have a party. If you were caught, no one would call the police. Everybody knew everybody else see, and you got the living daylights scared out of you and your parents got told. In fact, today that would be juvenile delinquency, and a kid would have a record for doing it. My brother got a new BB gun and shot the neighbor's windshield out as he drove past the house. He stopped and took him to father out in the field and said, "You've got a problem, and I think you'd better correct it." And it got corrected out in the field. Juvenile delinquency and we use to have the same thing, but it was fun; and was handled by your family and whoever you did the damage to. There was no police record, and that's one thing I feel so bad about today because if a kid even steps on a neighbor's lawn the police is called, and you have a police record.

MH: Can you really remember, well this being a farming district and everything I doubt if there was many people out of work, but can you recall any people having a hard time?

MP: Well, I don't think anyone had a great deal [of] hard times. Everybody had a hard time. Occasionally, my father would get called for jury duty and what a glorious time that was. He would be paid five dollars for a day of jury duty, and we would have five dollars in cash because as I said, we did not live in a money world. We had things we needed, and we didn't get them with money. But, if he occasionally got a day of jury duty or he'd be called to haul gravel on the road sometime. They seemed to give everybody a chance for these duties. There were a few families here who did have a hard time. Widows particularly who had children, they had a hard time. But, people just helped them out. There were no charitable organizations. There didn't have to be. If you lived with a family next door who didn't have coal, you'd send half of your coal over to him. And if you knew the family because, I think primarily because they were of the same religion you were close to each other. There was one man here who was considered a wealthy man, and he went to the store every fall and had coal sent to all the widows, and bushels of apples, and a box of oranges. We use to envy them because they got a box of oranges and all we got was one for Christmas. In clothing, and I told my kids and they find it hard to believe. We did not have a lot of clothes. You go into old homes and find small closets, and my kids can't get over where did they put their clothes? But, the girls had long socks and garters to hold them up, and we had one pair. We would go to bed early at night and my mother would wash them out by hand and hang them in front of the coal stove, on the metal rod behind the log. And the next day our underclothes and our socks were clean for the next day. She did this every night.

We had one pair and if you outgrew it or wore them out you would get one more new pair. But, other than that we wore the same ones, you never went to the closet and wondered what to wear today, one dress to wear only to church or parties. The boys had a good pair of pants and a good shirt. School got kinda of bad sometimes because the boys had one pair of shoes, and they went out and did the chores and milked the cows and fed the pigs and came to

school on a cold winter day when all the windows were closed. The heat was on, I am sure that today they would be condemned.

MH: The winters around here. Now the snowplows come by and plow the roads. What did you do back then?

MP: We didn't do it. If you had to go anyplace you went through the fields. The road drifted, because of the fences being there, the roads drifted first. I had an uncle who was killed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February I think, in Ammon. There was no way, the roads were all drifted so bad and it was storming. There was no way to take him to a funeral home, and so the mortician rode a horse out, pulling the casket behind him and the box it had been shipped in. They brought the casket and it rolled over three or four times, but he brought it to the home, and he was taken care of in the home and put into the casket. Then they had to be going through the fields because the fences were always covered. You could go right over the top of the fences. And that day we had the funeral for him and took him to the cemetery. After his body was put in, then they put him in a sleigh and went through the fields, but to get there the sleigh tipped over and the casket was rolled out three times on the way to the cemetery. When they got there, they, they opened the casket and straightened him out and put him back in and buried him. You never went down the roads. You went down the fields. There were no snowplows. Our school buses we went the same way. We went in sleighs that had a canvas top over it and had a stove in it. When we got to any place where there was a drift, then the sleigh would tip over which often times it did. There was a danger of fire, and we walked in case it tipped over. Nobody would be burned.

MH: What was the school like at that time? They've got big school houses now with 30 or 40 rooms.

MP: Well, the school I went to had well not that many. I never went to a school that had more than one grade in a room. In the school I went to, of course, I went to Ammon and there was the grade school and the high school there, so there were 8 to 12 grades. The school I went to was fairly good sized. Of course, there was no such thing as a hot lunch program. Everybody took their lunch. It was very often baking powder biscuits. I was always so proud because we were never poor. That was rated poverty if you had to have baking powder biscuits for your lunch. If you could afford bread, you were in upper bracket. We always afforded bread. They had a gymnasium. Of course, they hadn't always had that. Here we had when, we called the town hall and every organization used that. The school used it and the church used it and when these traveling shows came through, they were put on there.

Of course, later on schools were built bigger and more families came and they had to teach more subjects, but there was a school just south of us here that had all eight grades in one room. And it was interesting that the year I graduated from eighth grade, the state gave the test. I imagine they give the same type of thing now, but in the eighth grade measuring each school against the other and the boy that got the highest grade same from the school that had eight grades in one room. He made the highest grade in the state of Idaho, so poverty, sharing, and those kinds of things certainly did not hurt you, if you wanted to learn. Of course, the Depression was starting to ease up a little as I went on into high school. It was all group dating, there was no such thing as single dating. There was no such thing as going steady until you really knew this was the person you wanted to marry because you cut yourself out of all the fun.

The fun thing was group activities. Community activities were the things that were considered fun.

Now there's just the two of you that go to the show. Then the whole group of you went to the dance together and exchanged dances and you went home together. And that's why I feel sorry for these kids you know. They start going with one person and go with nobody else and always go alone with that person why they're missing half their lives.

I love to read and our Christmas, we always had Christmas and toys and things. My family and most of the families I knew, Christmas was a big event. We only got one thing. Like I had five brothers just younger than me and one would get a truck and one would get a wagon and one would get tinker toys, but everybody—it was a community thing too—everybody shared with everybody. And the only book that I ever got in my life other than books that were in school. At that time we didn't have school libraries. At Christmas I always got a book and an orange. That made Christmas for me, and we each got one thing. Santa Claus always came after we had went to bed, and our stockings were filled. Certainly not like the kids get today, but we did have, always, Christmas. And there were always these families that was poor. They had a girl; somebody in the community saw that she got a doll.

MH: Mrs. Pierson was born in Ammon, Idaho. Her parents were born, her father in Utah and her mother here in Ammon. Her occupation at the time of the Depression was a child.