

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

# Melvin Wilcox- The Depression in Idaho

By Melvin Wilcox

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## Box 2 Folder 52

Oral Interview conducted by Layne Jones

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin March 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

LJ: The topic we are going to talk about is the Depression. I'm talking with Melvin Wilcox of Blackfoot, Idaho, who is a grandfather of mine. We are making this interview for the class of Idaho History. We will now start the interview.

MW: My name is Melvin Wilcox. I was born in Paragonah, Utah, 1902, but we moved to Idaho in about six months after my birth. So I have been an Idahoan most of the time since then. We moved out of Idaho just preceding the Depression, just after World War I and worked in Utah where I was married. We were with Safeway store and then was transformed to Trinidad, Colorado. I was with the store there approximately a year and a half with the Safeway store and then my wife's father became seriously ill, and he had an 80 acre farm in Shelley, so they wanted us to come and run the farm for them. So we moved back to Idaho, and we were real glad to get back. Just after we got back, during the first year of farming operations, the Depression really hit.

LJ: Mr. Wilcox, could you tell us a little bit about your occupations that you held during the Depression more in detail and the kind of jobs you did?

MW: Well, primarily at the beginning of it we were farmers. Potato raising was the main crop that we grew, and up until that time, we had received a very good price for the potatoes so we had high expectancy in farming. We thought that we were really going to make some money; but by the time we got the potatoes harvested the first year, the price had dropped to under a dollar—and before the next spring, they were hardly worth getting out of the cellar. So we didn't make any money at potatoes. We had a few cows we were milking, and so I sold milk to a few customers down in the town of Shelley. Then I started working in Malary store there at Shelley as a grocery man for Mr. Malary and worked there Saturday afternoons and late in the evening and several days a week when I could get off. During the winter, I worked steady there. But, wages were so small, that it didn't amount to much. We had to save every dime we could get. We had one girl then, and while we were still in Shelley, our second daughter was born which was Layne's mother. Then we leased 60 acres down in Blackfoot area, and Lenna's father got a relative of his, an old time friend, to run his place. We moved into a two-room house on this 60 acre farm, and actually we were only paying 2 or 3 dollars an acre per year lease on it, but we had a hard time making enough to eat. Our potatoes and income were so small that we raised a lot of turkeys. We bought baby turkeys, and a few hens, and saved the eggs, and set the hen turkeys and raised turkeys, but we sold them that fall for 10 cents a pound killed and dressed. We sold eggs for as low as 10 cents a dozen.

Our potatoes we sold for 20 cents a hundred. So I was forced to go back to work to a store in Blackfoot. It was the old Merc store, and I worked there for 15 dollars a week. I drove eight miles a day to get to work, and I was also milking seven cows before I went to work and milked them again in the evening, and Lenna chased her legs off herding turkeys and gathering eggs and taking care of the chickens. We had the two babies now, and they were both preschool age, and Norma was very small and having a rough time getting a start.

We tried every kind of livestock we could. We had a few pigs and chickens and turkeys and cows. We managed to eat, that's about all. We couldn't buy any clothes; we

didn't go to a picture show for months. We had an old Model A Ford that we could get enough money together for gas to get to work and back, but we didn't have any extra at all. Of course, we didn't have any extra to spend. It was about this time when Lenna wondered if she might be able to get a job teaching school. She had a certificate from previous years because she taught two years before we were married. So she inquired at the Blackfoot school district, and she was able to get a job teaching. So we decided that she could make more teaching than I could working in the store. I decided to stay home on the farm and take care of the little girls, and she would teach that winter. However, her wages at that time were only 75 dollars a month and the district was in such poor financial condition that she was unable to cash her warrants when she got them without discounting them 10 percent so actually she was making less than 70 dollars a month, but it was more wages for less hours, than by far, I was making. We had problems with Norma, our second little girl. She couldn't digest milk, and we didn't know it. She was just going down hill every day. So the doctor told us to try SMA, which was a new product for infants. We bought a can of it, and it seemed to agree with her. But if I remember right it was \$1.25 a can, and she drank two cans a week so we were selling a pig about every week, and we got about \$2.50 for every pig. So we kid Norma about costing us a pig every week to feed her. She laughs. We had our good times too and enjoyed our children very much and even though she was a small child, she's a small woman yet, but she laughs and says that why she was so little because she was born in the Depression.

Even though we had rough times and worry we still look back with fond memories on those days. It wasn't until I started carpenter work several years after this that we finally started to get ahead a little, and then after I'd learned the carpenter trade well enough, I joined the Union. We got union wages which was about \$1.50 an hour. The Depression now was over its worst. Things were starting to get better, and I got a job working on the Idaho Falls temple, and even though we had to travel 25 miles both ways. A group of four of us alternated with our automobiles, and we worked there until the temple was completed, which was over a year. That got us feeling a little better. Then I got a job at Ogden doing carpentry work, and we sold the farm in the Riverside area, and we moved to Ogden. We build a new house down there, and both of us worked. Lenna worked ten hours a day at the Hill Air Force base, and I worked ten hours a day, seven days a week on construction both at Hill Field and at Clearfield. It was during those years that we got our feet under us, and by the time we had two more children, another girl and a boy. We were in Ogden about two and one half to three years and then moved back to Blackfoot and bought in with my brother-in-law on a lumberyard and it was there that our children were raised from infants to adults and our financial circumstances were much better, and we enjoyed our family life, and even all of our life we enjoyed our children and our family affairs. We had a lot of pleasures along with the hardships and we still are. We enjoy our grandchildren very much.

LJ: Could you tell us a little bit more about your family life in specific now about the things that you and your family did during the Depression?

MW: Well, we were very determined, Lenna especially, that things would be well kept. We didn't have many new clothes but what we did have was well taken care of. We

always had a best outfit to go to church in and the best clothes for the children, and they were taught to respect the things they had and take good care of them. And I don't think I have ever spent a day with Lenna that she didn't have her face made up. I think it's very few days that I haven't shaved my whiskers off. Even though we wore some well-worn clothes around the job and in the field, we always wore clean clothes, ate off clean dishes, and slept in clean beds. And for those things we are really grateful. And our children were always a joy to us. We had little programs all of our own and we all went to church as a group. So those are the parts about the Depression that makes you think back and really feel that there was enjoyment in all that we did. And so we do have fond memories of those family growing up days. We didn't have any power and no electricity. We didn't have gas lines, but we had to do a lot of inventing to make things look modern while we were on the farm. This is reminiscing a little—going back during the Depression. We had a gasoline iron for ironing clothes, a gasoline lamp to light in our house with, and a gasoline stove to cook our food on. When we needed to keep more light in our chicken coop so the hens would lay better, give them longer daylight hours for feeding. So we fixed up an alarm clock on the side of this gasoline lantern, and we would light the lamp and set the alarm for ten o'clock at night. When the alarm went off, it would turn the gas off and turn the light out. That would give the chickens three to four more hours of light. It was laughable and we would laugh about it yet, how those hens, and we bought 200 to 300 hens, would learn and that when the alarm started to ring they had to get on the roost because it meant that they only had a few seconds and it would be dark. And we sat out there a few winter nights and laughed when they needed for the roost. So we did have good producing hens and we really took care of them.

Another thing, we didn't have was TV or radio, and our first radio was bought after Lenna had taught school for about two years, and we did enjoy that music out on the farm. We played it so loud so that we could hear it outside. We really enjoyed that, and that was the first musical enjoyment or instruments we had. We also notice an ad in a Sears' catalog that had a record player on or a phonograph we called them then, and I don't remember how many dollars it was. It couldn't have been many, or we wouldn't have been able to get it. But, we ordered it for the girls. When it came we were just so thrilled over it. It came with several records, and we were able to buy a few more, and the girls when they had to spend time in the house, played these records, and they really enjoyed it.

LJ: What was the food like, and how was it prepared for your family during the Depression?

MW: Most of it, the biggest part of it—came right off our farm. We would kill a pig when we needed fresh meat, and we used the lard to fry things in, and we would also use lard to make our own soap with. We would kill a turkey and have fried turkey—that was part of our almost daily menu. Occasionally we would divide up a beef with some of the neighbors. Someone would kill a beef, and we would buy part of it. So we did have a little beef, but not very much, because we just couldn't afford to buy a whole carcass; and we just had to skimp on that. The green vegetables we raise in our gardens and fresh vegetables—green lettuce and stuff like that—we just didn't have. We ate a lot of potatoes, we always had carrots, and turnips, and parsnips. We always canned food.

Lenna would even can meat, and sometimes we took one quarter of beef and canned it. So we had a lot of home canned stuff, and we cracked our own meal for cereal and ground it for flour. We were able to buy a fifty pound sack of flour for about 1 dollar. We made our own bread, and Lenna was always a good cook. She always found time and materials to bake a cake or pie. So we always had all we wanted to eat and what we wanted to eat. But, not a variety like we have now-a-days, but we had what we needed and all we wanted to eat.

LJ: How did you keep things cool, like an ice box or something like that?

MW: Well, I should go back a little bit further and say that the first year on this farm we had to haul water from the neighbors, and this was about one half mile away for drinking water. But, then Lenna's brother, Wayne, who was staying with us, was about 14 years old and so he was helping us out a little too. He and I decided to see if we couldn't dig a well so we dug a square hole, and we curbed it, and we would dig a little each day; and we would use a horse too and a cable and a pulley and wood buckets to pull the dirt out of the well. We dug it during that winter and got down about forty feet 'til we hit the water, but we hit good clear clean drinking water, so we had water for our stock, and good water for our house. We also used this well to keep things cool, like our butter and fresh meats, and poultry. We would put them in a good sized bucket with an extra rope and would let them down inside of the well to where the bucket was just barely in the water and that would keep things cool. It kept butter just a real nice temperature and meat would keep for several days or even for a couple of weeks. So we used the well for more than just water, and we got by pretty nicely.

Well, I have told you the bad things about the depression and I've told you the joys that we have had, the simple little ways of living. A depression is no fun. You hear people say that what they young folks in this generation need is a real depression, but we couldn't wish this on anybody. Times were just too trying and too hard, and it just isn't worth it. We would hate very much to see another full-scale depression like that one. We can't see that any good came out of it, we know that we learned to appreciate prosperity, but it isn't worth all of the discomforts and rough times that we had, and we are not a couple that would say that this country needs another depression. We are really convinced that this is really one thing that we don't need. We would much rather see prosperity in times like that.

LJ: Thank you. This has been an interview with Melvin Wilcox of Blackfoot, Idaho, on March 30, 1974. This is Layne Jones reporting for Idaho History Class.