

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Paul Larken – Life during the Depression

By Paul Larken

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Box 2 Folder 9

Oral Interview conducted by Larry Walker

Transcribed by Sarah McCorristin February 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history report. I am Larry Walker. Today, December 1, 1974, I am going to interview Mr. Paul Larken. The general topic will be the Depression between the 1920's and the 1930's.

Larry Walker: Mr. Larken, where were you born?

Paul Larken: Born in Ogden, Utah.

LW: How long have you lived there? How long were you living there?

PL: About the first two years of my life.

LW: And then where did you move to?

PL: No Northern Utah, Southern Idaho.

LW: Where were your parents born?

PL: One of them was born in Oxford; Iowa; the other in Snowville, Utah.

LW: Okay, thank-you. What was your occupation when you, when you were in Idaho?

PL: I was a farmer in Idaho.

LW: And then you, you were- we were speaking before about you moved into the- went into the railroad.

PL: Yes, then I became a locomotive crane operator.

LW: I'm going to turn the mike over now to Mr. Larken and let him tell you some of, some of his experiences while he was in Idaho and part of Wyoming during the depression.

PL: The depression really hit the East in the early spring of 1931. It was very deadly and very earnest. It was somewhat longer 'till it spread to the Rockies, although it had already gotten to California and parts of Texas. Many men were being laid off where I worked, and these moved away. Their homes came up for sale. From the fall of 1931 to the Spring of 1934, proved the most terrible time of my life. I will tell about a few good things along with the bad.

The first snow came on the 19th of October and we did not see the ground again until the first week of May. In fact, all the railroad workers dressed in white hats, red shirts, and blue jeans and skirts to form a Forth of July parade. As we came down the main streets of town in was snowing and it did not stop until we had six inches of snow.

The Spring of 1932 saw hundreds of people trailing through every twenty-four hours in every shape and condition of vehicle imaginable, all completely broke and destitute. The families from the south and south-west were particularly pitiful. They had never had anything in all their lives and had never been more than 150 miles away from their homes in their lives either. So no- no clothes to fit the cold northern weather. Many left home with all their worldly goods in an old jalopy not fit for a 150 mile trip, expecting to find occasional work and enough to buy gas and live off the land, or beg for something to eat. You can imagine what happened when; coming North they ran into the string of educated slickers and northern city folks who had already gleaned the land dry. Traveling the same road and direction they were. By the time most folks had crossed through Wyoming, it-they had had it. Many had seemed to think that everything would be alright and OK once they reached California or the Coast. That was an utter disappointment for which they were in for.

The railroad trains were even worse. Everyone that came through carried from twenty-five to two hundred transients, hitchhikers. At first the railroad bulls kicked them off. Several of them got beat up and two killed so they went in pairs, often the bulls got put off instead of the transients and they went in sixes and eights and still they were beaten up or put off. Or, the people piled back on faster than they were put off. The hobo jungles swelled to a good size community and definitely dangerous for any outsider. Once anything or anyone went into that camp you could consider it lost. Transients appropriated anything they could lay their hands on, irrespective of who, when, and where. Much farm livestock and fowl was simple killed and carted off. On the plain open statement that they were starving. Many, many cattle and sheep, along the highway and railroad turned up missing, even the trains hauling livestock and produce came up missing much of their stuff, even while traveling. You could expect at least a dozen transient and hobos knocking on your door everyday and often they would be woman and small children. Women began coming through and soon there were almost half as many women and young girls transient as there were men. They came alone, in small groups, or in big gangs. The big gangs of women were by far the hardest and most dangerous and inconsiderate, far more so than the men. It got so bad you did not wander around alone, however, at least seven or eight or the women that I know of, however, were found frozen to death on the trains and I have no idea now many suffocated from riding too close to the engine or opening exposed to smoke through the tunnel. Many were found who had crawled down in refrigerator cars heated by kerosene heaters and been affixiated.

Often transients found themselves begging from residents far more destitute than even they were. Many hundreds of head of sheep and cattle were lost by ranchers in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. Due to the extreme hard winter and freezing and a great depth of snow, many of the cattle also starved to death. Plowing the roads open was often hampered by worn out, broken down; simply junk heaps abandoned on the highway was literally lined with hundreds of miles of abandoned junk heaps. Something had to be done. The State and Federal government began to take over. The situation on the railroads nearly reversed itself. Towns, instead of kicking off the transients that were forced by armed guards and police to remain on and go through the town. Other

transients were simply given enough gas to get to the next town and fired on through. Hitchhikers, men and women, were put to shoveling now or sweeping streets to get a free meal, a night's bed in jail, or a plot house on the train in herds without any tickets and sent on their way. In some places they were hauled in trucks to the edge of town and told to be on their way. States began to close their borders. Guards had refused admittance to anyone except bonified residents, or relatives and such. California was one of the first to do so and you can easily understand why. It had swollen to four times its usual population and could not even begin to furnish its own natives work. Let alone the gigantic influx of destitute people who flocked in by the thousands, day and night. Relief funds were exhausted, emergency funds exhausted, tax money gone, and the whole Pacific Coast was in danger of going bankrupt or starving in one big bunch.

The Federal government had to step in and force states to open their borders, promising huge sums of aid in relief work. Hay was shipped in by the railroads to Wyoming, Montana and Idaho by the Federal government. This helped the local ranchers, but not those with stock on the range. Airlifts for hay was started for them. The hay dropped from planes, because it, they could not land. It helped some, but it could not be distributed properly. There were no jeeps or helicopters those days and so it was a haphazard job at best. In the result of the 1931 winter and the loss of buying power money by nearly half the population, farmers and ranchers, went broke by the thousands. Those who did not had far worse and harder times yet to face. The plant had laid off men until the force, which had once been over 3,000 had dwindled to about 208- but many more layoffs were to come. Many of its sections had been closed down completely and were cut to four days per week. Our doctor bill had gotten sell out of hand and as I was working from three to four days per week I finally made a deal with the doctor to work for him after work on Saturday and for \$3.00 a day. I did that for two years to pay off the doctor bills.

The Governor and several of the Senators and people from the federal Aviation Commission in due time had a strip in Evanston and looked after and over for an emergency airfield. It was needed as an area and the Governor of the inspection he informed us that the Government, Federal Government, was starting a WPA and with their help and an OK for Federal funds, it would undoubtedly could be built at Federal expense. That is how they got their first airfield. Later on, as no one had any money, the young folks had to make their own entertainment.

Skis and tobogganing could be gotten from the YMCA and a fair ski jump was made by the local people with a little help from the city fathers and tobogganing and skiing parties were organized. The famous Dean Hill, just beyond where we lived was used and it was a real steep hill. You could either go down and out across the Dean Field or right down the main street of town, as there was little or no traffic. I would get the children bundled up and along with the neighbors or a couple of others down the hill we'd come. We used the street and ended up about three blocks below our place. The hand sleds were much faster than toboggans. We had to get them, however, from the YMCA as none of us could afford them. We had never seen any other hand sleds so big as these. They would easily handle four or five people, which was all you were supposed to put on them

anyhow. I could not afford to buy a sled, but we got along. Many races were won, everybody joined in the fun. Big bonfires were made at the tip of the hill, and Maybelle and other of her girlfriends had hot chocolate and coffee put on.

Our home became a stop for all. Some of the others did likewise, but it seemed by far the biggest crowd formed at our place. The guest often brought coffee, sugar, cocoa, lemons and ice cream, and even donuts, and the likes. Because we were refused money for anything we put out. I got passable on skis, but the toboggan and the sled business, when properly waxed our team could not be beat. Some homemade racing bobsleds were made with the aid of a welder and steel from the plant which was furnished and they's really frutil. The traffic was full length of the street and was cleared every hour or so and down through town we would come on racing sleds, often going almost to the far end of town amid much shouting and cheers. Everybody had some really good times, we had even rigged old Hank's airplane motor up on the back of one of the old altered racing sleds, and then we did have something. Only the town quickly outlawed it because we had no guard over the prop. But out on the open highway or across the fields as soon as the snow was deep enough to bury the fences, we really let it fly. We had no way of telling how fast we had traveled, but it was estimated around at 80 mph.

We bought what coal we could but often ran out before we could buy more. I would take the old car and pick and shovel and head for a place I knew not far out of town, where the coal was exposed right on the surface. I would pick with the shovel and dig until I had filled the back and even the front of the car in sacks of coal and return home. I do not know who's land it was or even if it was owned. But we had to have heat. There were many such exposed deposits around town. The exposed coals was, of course, oxidized slake and burned very fast, but you didn't freeze. However, much of the time the snow was too deep and drifted and I couldn't make it. Then we would have to pick coal up along the railroad tracks and in the railroad yards. Sometimes the railroad bulls will haze us out, particularly if they didn't recognize us. I hate to say it, but I have walked out of town to the edge of town to watch for a train with a coal car coming through as they would slow down for the guards I would jump on it and heave off coal over the side as fast as I could. Jumping off, of course, before it entered town. More than once I have noticed the hobos and transients riding the train, realized what I was up to, and immediately pitched in to give me a hand. When the train left, we would, of course, go back with sacs and pick it up.

I often hunted rabbits at the edge of town for meat. There were some snow shoes, but mostly they were cottontails and brush rabbits. Sometimes I would go out to the old coal mines and after I had got through hunting, pick up the coal from the slag dump in order to augment our heating supple. There were more and more lay-offs at the plant. In fact, there were whole sections of it completely closed down, and it stood in good stead to be completely closed down, and it stood in good stead to be completely closed down, which would practically idle all people in town. The government had started the CCC camp, the WPA and the PWA, and the Public Relief Agency. However, if you had a job, any job, you were not eligible. So it was of no use to us. They began burning sheep by the hundreds and dumping thousands of crates of oranges into the Pacific. How very much

we would have loved to have beef and giving it out to the needy, and once more I found I was not eligible because of a poor \$18 a week. I was forced to stand by and watch my neighbor with exactly the same size of family and exactly the same size house who did not want to work and would not-get his rent paid, his coal furnished, their clothing and bedding furnished, lights paid and more groceries and allowance for groceries than I made complete in a whole week. Getting canned beef on top of it, all of which they became tired of, and fed to their dogs.

LW: Mr. Larken, what does WPA, PWA, and CCC stand for?

PL: Well, it's the Civil Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, and the PWA, well I don't know. I think that was the one where ya didn't have to work.

LW: I see! What were these established, during, when the depression time came around?

PL: They certainly were, as a matter to take care of the people when the states found it absolutely impossible to do so with the faculties they had.

LW: Okay, one other question. What, you're talking about, auto transients, what are auto transients?

PL: The people had to move from where they were to keep them from starving and of course, they always figured the pastures were greener somewhere else. The transients and auto transients were those that moved anyway they could, either on foot or in automobiles to go to someplace else in hopes that it would be better.

LW: In the beginning of your, of the, your discussion here we were talking, you were talking about the winter you had as really, really bad. What was the a usual winter in the Idaho area?

PL: Well, I believe that they were on the whole, colder, quite a bit colder then they are at the present. The snowfall varied greatly, some years, very deep, some years hardly any. I believe they have had even heavier snows lately, then they used to have, but not nearly so cold of weather.

LW: You were discussing about relief for individuals. Was this for people who were not working or why don't you describe that a little more in detail?

PL: The people that were eligible for relief were, first of all, those that had no jobs whatsoever. They were supposedly in the worst need, or course. Some of them were allowed to earn as much as \$4. But if you made above that usually you were not eligible for relief.

LW: Okay, thank you.

PL: It varied from state to state.

LW: It varied from state to state, I see. What was the relief in the Idaho Wyoming area?

PL: Well, it seldom consisted of any money. It was started out originally on the basis of exactly what you needed and, of course, the most common thing was rent and heat in that part of the country particularly in the winter. Then later, of course, food and clothing. Ahh, much of it was put out as what was known as a dole system. You got stuff canned at other places in canaries and different stuff at government expense and shipped out and distributed to the people. That even went so far later in order to keep the school children food and clothing to go to school, because otherwise, it would of gone to a halt. Very, very many of the people had absolutely no money at all, and the country had to operate for nearly two years on little or no finances whatsoever.

LW: We were discussing about, trying to summarize this and he was talking about the many millionaires who went broke and many people who became millionaires. I thought this was kind of interesting how the people- how they could become rich during the depression, I'll have him tell you about this.

PL: Many people as you know went broke in the great stock market crash. But quickly and steadily many other people became millionaires. Two fields in which they became, much money was made by those who controlled the source of supply, and those who could venture into real-estate. Both these things came back. Now during the depression, people were not destitute, hungry, or not clothed, and that because there was not enough stuff to go around, that is not the case. There was plenty to go around; in fact, there was a surplus which was destroyed, much of it by the government to hold prices where they didn't break still more people. The reason the people could have got the stuff if there'd been transportation or if they'd had money. They went without because there was absolutely no money. There was no work, no money, therefore, they couldn't buy and the stuff could not be sold. Those people who could buy it and so controlled the market and handle it, made millions while the rest of us went hungry.

LW: I would like to thank Mr. Larken for his time and effort in telling us a little bit about how the depression was for him. I'd like to close with a thank you to him and let him close with some closing remarks.

PL: One thing the depression taught me for sure is that a person is very foolish and very ridiculous if they think for one moment they have anything coming. People do not have anything coming. Anything they get they should earn, and to get it in any other way, sooner or later they will have to pay for it.

Also, it, ah, settled things with me considerable; I can now be satisfied with many things that I used to couldn't, because I've seen them far, far worse. And, so it proved as a leveling device in a lot of cases, in more ways than one. It leveled some of the high and mightily down with the rest of us and it taught some of the rest of us that we were better prepared to survive than they were. In fact, it leveled people and adjusted things and

while I don't advise another depression to help level things, it certainly worked out that way and in the long run done us a lot of good as well as an awful lot of harm.