

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

O. M. Jones – Experiences of the Depression

By O. M. Jones

December 1, 1975

Box 2 Folder 5

Oral Interview conducted by Lynn M. Johnson

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi January 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

I am Lynn Johnson. Today is December 1, 1975. I am going to interview O. M. Jones the general topic will be on the Depression.

Lynn Johnson: Where about were you born?

O. M. Jones: I was born in Byron, Wyoming, on June 4, 1916.

LJ: 1916?

OMJ: Yes.

LJ: Then your parents were born?

OMJ: My mother was born in Southern Utah at Lee's Ferry. My father was born in White Post, Indiana.

LJ: Quite a difference between the two of them.

OMJ: ea. My father's family later moved to San Luis Valley in Colorado; and then later up to the Big Horn Basin. My mother's family moved from Southern Utah to the Big Horn Basin about the same time, around 1900.

LJ: You lived in Cody how many years?

OMJ: We have lived in Cody... we lived in Cody a couple of years when we were first married, then we moved away for several years and then came in. since we came back to Cody, we've been here about twenty-four years.

LJ: Twenty-four years?

OMJ: We worked for Husky. Came back and I've worked for Husky since then.

LJ: You have also been a guide for a few years?

OMJ: Yeah. I've worked for hunters and hunting business and guiding. I've done quite a lot of hunting on my own, one thing or another in that direction. But my steady employment, my means of making a living has been working for husky Oil Company.

LJ: What do you do over there?

OMJ: Well, at first I was hired to be a welder. I did that for several yeas and then went into control instruments. For the last, let's se, somce'59 I've been in control instrument department. My official title over there now is Control Instrument Technician.

LJ: What does that include now? Does that include like controlling how much gas or how much crude comes in here?

OMJ: Well, I have to take care of and maintain, install instruments that control flow and temperatures and pressure mainly; throughout the refinery.

LJ: Quite a process over there?

OMJ: Yeah, it is quite a process. I don't know, I couldn't guess how many instruments we have, but we have three different units. There is a crude unit, the reformer, and catalytic cracking unit. They all have quite a number of instruments to take care of. It's a real interesting job and I like it. I think it's the best job I've ever had in my life. I've done a number of different things.

LJ: About how old were you when the depression hit?

OMJ: Well, when the Stock Market broke in 1929 I was thirteen years old I believe. That ought to figure out about right somewhere.

LJ: You were born in 1916?

OMJ: I was born in 1916 in Byron at home. My folks raised nine children and I don't think any of them were born in a hospital and they were all born at home.

LJ: When you were born, was it during the winter or.....?

OMJ: No, I was born in June.

LJ: In June.

OMJ: I was a little child in a family of nice, the oldest boy. I had four sisters older than me, two brothers and two sisters younger. So when the depression hit I was old enough to understand pretty much what it was meaning to us. I didn't really understand I guess what caused it or how we were going to get out of it or anything of that sort. But I did not know what it was doing to the people, what we had to put up with because of the depression. See I was, I started in high school in 1930. I actually grew up during the depression I never had what you could call a steady job until about the time the war started. I always felt like it was the war that pulled us out of the depression more than anything the government ever did. Although maybe the government did help to sustain the people. I don't think the depression was alleviated very much by the actions of the government.

LJ: You mean by the WPA camps?

OMJ: Yeah. Those helped a lot of people because it took the people off the streets, gave them something to eat, and gave them a little something to do. It helped them in a lot of ways, but still it did not seem like the economy improved a great deal until the war started. The was industries began to grow and hire people on their own and that's what really took people off the streets and put people to work so that they could have some

kind of meaningful occupation and something to do that could be proud of. Now there was the WPA, Work Pays America that hired people. They put a lot of money into the country. This money was given out. I remember at home in Byron, there was a certain amount of money given to the town from government that was supposed to be distributed some way among the people. There was some argument among the town fathers as to how this was to be done. One man I remember said it doesn't make any difference whether the people work or not. Just give them the money and that's what the government wants. We just want to spread the money out so that the people can live, can buy things, and start the economy rolling again. Other people said well as long as we got the money let's do something useful with it. So at that time in Byron the streets, most of the streets were lower than the irrigation ditches that went up and down the sides of the streets. There was irrigation ditches on each side of the pert near every street in town. So in order to do away with street flooding when the ditches will run over, they took the WPA money and hired people with teams of wagons to haul dirt into the town. They spent one whole winter practically building up the streets in town. Raising the level of the streets so that id the ditch plugged up and ran over it wouldn't leave a big lake in the middle of the street, which I thought was a very good thing to do because they did take the money and do something useful with it. Instead of just passing it out, give it to the people. Another thing that they used it to do; I don't know if I really understood how this expense of this project was divided, but some way the farmers in the area, some of them needed land drains. The government paid men to go in there and dig trenches by hand. They laid tile and covered it up again. This was done on several places down there. I think probably the farmers bought the material that went into the drain with the tile and so forth and the government furnished the manpower to dig trenches to put them in.

LJ: Didn't you have a lot of alkali down there?

OMJ: There was quite a bit, yeah. There was a drainage district there before that, but up at that time there were some place needed drainage that weren't included in the drainage district. So they would dig these drains and tie them into the existing drainage system. It was all covered drain system; there were no open drains down there at that time. So they would bury the tile and run the water off down into the river. Another thing that I used to do to make a little bit of money was, there was some oil activity down there and from time to time the oil companies would need some work done with a team, usually a slip scrapper, plow slip scrapper and a Fresno or something like that. My dad would let me take the team and I'd go out to some tank farm and build fire walls around the tanks with a team of slip scrapper. Or there was a oil field down on the river bottom. Every spring during high water, the water'd rake out the bridges and roads. So I could usually count on a few days work with a team and the slip scrapper and a plow down there rebuilding roads and putting in bridges and one thing and other. They used to pay, the oil company used to pay two dollars and a quarter a day for a man and a team with a slip scrapper and a plow. So the pay wasn't too good, but it was, well it was pretty good considering the time. I mean, a person make two and a quarter a day didn't do, wasn't doing too bad really considering that a lot people weren't making anything. Another thing we used to do was clean the town ditches. A friend of mine who would use his dad's team and I'd

use my dad's team, which would make us a four horse team; and we'd get one of the old Martin ditchers and clean all the ditches in town.

LJ: Take all the weeds and?

OMJ: Well, it'd just dig out the muck and weeds and stuff out of the ditch and clean out the ditches so they wouldn't run over. This had to be done every spring anyway. So there for several years we, the two of us, got that job every year, made us a little bit of money. I don't remember what they paid us for that, but we did make a little spending money that way. Then about the time I graduated from High school there was a school teacher that came down there and organized a dance orchestra. I was in that. We used to make usually, I think, about four dollars a night playing for dances. We played for one or two dances a week. Usually two dances a week we'd play but sometimes it would only be one.

LJ: Pretty good.

OMJ: I was lucky that way I had a little extra money coming in there that a lot of kid didn't have. But I really enjoyed it a lot. I thought at one time that I'd like to make a career out of music, but I really never got that good I guess.

LJ: You're still calling square dances today aren't ya?

OMJ: Well, ya. I call square dances now. That's something that didn't come into my life though till about the time we moved to Cody. We started this last time, we started square dancing. Of course, I didn't call for years, we danced. Then a year ago a club over at Metesse runs out of a caller and they talked me into learning how to call, calling for them. I had done a little calling before that, not very much. So I'm calling for them which is mostly enjoyment. I don't get much pay for it, but I enjoy it a lot and it's a good hobby.

LJ: What did your dad do?

OMJ: Well, my dad was a farmer. He did work some in the oil fields down around Byron, but his principle means of making a living were from the farm for most of his life.

LJ: Like was it grain or sugar beets or?

OMJ: Well, begin with he didn't have a very big farm. He never farmed over sixty acres. He always kept a little dairy herd. We always milked eight or ten cows. My mother for years churned butter, sold butter at a grocery store in Lovell. People got to liking her butter so well they'd come in and ask for her product and eventually it evolved into a route that she had. Different people in Lovell come asked her to deliver butter to them. Because they couldn't well they just wouldn't get to the store in time to get butter and they like it so they asked to deliver it. She finally developed a route that she delivered butter down there a couple of time a week. It made quite a little bit of money. That quite a good share of her income from that source, then, of course, when she wasn't doing that;

she'd sell the cream to creamers either in Lovell, or Powell, or one of the surrounding towns. Then he did raise sugar beets some. For a good many years he worked at the sugar factory every winter. That didn't pay too good either. He did an awful lot of hard for an awful little pay. I think when he first started work down there he was only making about twenty-five cents an hour. I think he must have worked there close to twenty years; and I think when he quit; I don't believe he was making fifty cents an hour yet.

LJ: What was he doing there at the sugar plant?

OMJ: He did what they called pulling presses. I don't really understand the process well enough to explain to you what it was although I did see him do it a number of times. I used to go down there and watch him. They had some big cast iron presses of some of sort that were filled with the product in some development of the process. These presses had canvas covers and this product was in between the canvas. I don't know whether it pressed the liquid out of what it did. But these presses were made out of cast iron, just big cast iron frames. There would be, well, made kinda like one of these cast iron heat regulators, or heaters you know that you see in the buildings. They were in thin sections. They would go along and pull this sections apart and then banged them against each other to drop the product out of them into a vat below. This had to be done two or three times in a shift. It was one of the harder jobs in the factory at that time. He didn't like it too well but he kept it for year after year. There really wasn't too much choice at that time of what kind of job you could have. If you had any of a job it was good. Then he did work for the oil company some. In fact, some of my earliest memories are of him freighting for the oil companies with a team and wagon. Of course, at that time it was all capable tool drilling. They would ship stuff in on the railroad which the closest depot of the railroad was at Lovell. That was seven miles from home. He'd go down there lots of times and meet, take freight of the railroad and haul it back up to the oil field in Bryon or he'd move their drilling equipment from one location to another, he had a big team of gray mares. They weighed about a ton a piece.

LJ: Great big ones?

OMJ: Oh they were nice big mares. He'd freight that stuff with those two mares and you know with a wagon. Some of their drilling equipment was mounted on wheels. It'd take sometimes as many as eight or ten to move those units; he'd be part of it. He wouldn't be able to do it, he didn't have enough equipment to move the whole thing himself, but he would be part of the moving apparatus with his team along with some other guys and their teams. They'd move this stuff from one location to another. But that was so far back I don't remember too much about it. I remember going with him a number of times to move this equipment or haul some of the freight or one thing or another but I don't remember too many of the particulars.

LJ: The oil freight was just getting started about then, wasn't it?

OMJ: Yeah, there were just starting drilling. Well, I don't remember the first wheels down there, but I remember well, drilling with cable tool equipment before they got the

rotary equipment before they got the equipment in. it was a much different process than what they use now-a-days I'll tell you. In fact, they are sometimes on a well they be two or three years drilling one well, but today would take about thirty days. Later on, after I went to work in the oil fields and got to be a welder. I had my own equipment and I worked in the oil fields. I worked around drilling rigs quite a lot, of course, that was all rotary stuff. At that time, they were drilling wells or the average hole around this country was about ninety days. Now-a-day, of course, at the same depth they can drill in about thirty days and a lot of the wells now are much deeper. They do go eighty or ninety days now I understand, of course, I don't have much to do out in the field anyway, or practically nothing for that matter. So I couldn't say for sure how long it does take them but I know it's the deeper wells now-a-days don't take near the time the old cable tools used to take drill a couple of thousand feet.

LJ: Your brothers and sisters were doing various jobs then too, were kinda helping the family. It sounds like to me the family did not have that much problem keeping busy and having enough to do and enough means to provide for a family.

OMJ: Well, we always had plenty to eat; it wasn't always the best stuff. We were always warm and had shelter. We were never really out of the cold. I remember most of the things we ate during the depression were things that my mother put up out of the garden. The only thing that we bought during the wintertime was things that we couldn't raise and couldn't preserve ourself. This was done with our little dairy herd, eight or ten cows, and for several years as I stated my mother's butter route or the cream check. We used to feed the cows beet plup from the sugar factory; and that was one of my jobs was to go to Lovell on Saturday with a team and wagon and load up a load of beet plup and bring back to feed the cows for a week. There were times when the cream check just about paid for the beet pulp and that was about all. But we had to keep those cows milking and beet plup was a real good feed for cows. Course, you had to be careful how you feed it. If you fed it close before milking time it would make the milk taste. So we'd always milk the cows first then feed late.

LJ: Feed them afterwards. Is there anything else that you can think of, cause that's about what I needed is something.....?

OMJ: Well, I suppose I could go on forever talking about what we did. As kids we never had cars. That was the furthest thing from our minds. We knew there was no possible that we would ever own a car as much as value anyway. We did have a model T at one time that we run around in, but it wasn't much of a car. We were afraid to get out of town in it. Most of my traveling I did hitchhiking or on a freight car. I hitched a few rides on the freight car. I wanted to go very far from home I'd just get out on the highway and thumbed a ride. I worked on WPA as I said before, and a number of jobs and I also joined the Civilian Conservation Core. I was in the CCC's up North Fork here for some summer.

LJ: What did they do up there? I did not hear about that.

OMJ: Well, of course, you know that the CCC's or the civilian Conservation Core was. That was an organization for the youth of the country to try and get them out of towns into the mountains and do work out of trails and fought fires, forest fires. Remember these monuments up at the forest service boundary up North Fork? We built those. I worked on that. If you recall there is a buck fence around the ranger station up North Fork, Wapti Station, I helped build that when I was in CCC's.

LJ: That is quite a bit.

OMJ: They had a fire at Clearwater Creek that I went on. We went up there, I got in on that. I was out of camp when I came into camp, they'd been gone ten or different minutes. I wouldn't have had to go but I thought I'd like to go and help fight that fire. So I hurried and got stuff together and run up the trail and caught them. We had to hike about five or six miles up the creek to get to the fire. Then we fought fire for thirty-six hours before they even got to us with any food. When they finally got to us with food, they had apples and wieners. That was quite fire fighting expedition. Yet we finally got it put out. Then I got a chance to play in an orchestra again that winter, so they released me from the CCC's on the strength that I had a job elsewhere. So I left there and come back home. The normal tour I think was two years. I think if you signed up, you signed to stay two years but if you could get a job somewhere else, they would release you. It was kinda like being in the army. In fact, it was army staff. All the officers were from the army and it was kind of discipline. It wasn't really easy to get out. If you once signed in, you just about had to stay there or show that you had a job some place.

LJ: You had to have a lot?

OMJ: Well, yes, I think you just about had to have a job that would equal what they were paying, which was thirty dollars a month.

LJ: Before they would let you go?

OMJ: Before they'd give you discharge papers. Of course, their main reasons for existence was to get young people out of the cities and towns where they didn't have anything to do and put them someplace where they could be busy and have enough money for a little spending money. Of course, the government fed them and clothes. This was all taken care of in the camp. This was much the same as the army. They did an awful lot of good alright. I'm sure they did a lot of good.

LJ: Helped the youth learn to appreciate the hard work.

OMJ: Yea, a lot of them did. Of course, in that kind of an organization you could work about this hard as you wanted to or you could get by without working. In the WPA, of course, they had quite a reputation for people just signing on and going doing nothing and collecting their pay checks, which a lot of them did. But then if you wanted to work, actually, did want to work for what they got. Others thought they should just be paid because they were there, I guess. It's no different that it is today I don't suppose. People,

some thought different than it is today I don't suppose. People, some thought the world owed them a living; some thought they should make it themselves. I knew quite a few young people during the depression that had no family, or at least had no family that could take care of them that would go to work for a farmer or rancher just for their clothing and their board and room and maybe a dollar or two a week spending money, about all they got out of it, I saw that happen quite a bit of times. Jobs were awful hard to come by. There were times when you just couldn't find something to do it would usually be for a day or two or a week or so at a time. Then you'd be looking for another job. I know when I finally got a job that seemed like a real good steady job that I could depend on, it sure did feel good!

LJ: Give you confidence and you knew you could go ahead for more things?

OMJ: Yeah well, just the security of a steady job, knowing that you could work there as long as you did a good job and did your work that you'd have a job to go back to the next day. It was a pretty good feeling after going through all those years when you didn't know from one day to the next whether the job was going to run out or not if somebody else'd come along that was a better man than you or had better friends in the right places or something and get your job away from you. This happened a lot too. If you, of course, on this government run projects jobs, they were always people appointed by the government, by the government officials to run these jobs. In a good many instances they would see to it that their friends and relatives had jobs. Another thing they talk about quite a bit that happened during the depression was the killing of livestock, in order, doing away with surpluses. For instance, the price of mutton and wool products of sheep industries was considerably depressed because of the great numbers of sheep that were in country at that time. So the government went in and actually, what happened, they would go to a sheep man and say I'll give you two dollars a head for so many hundred sheep and then they would take them out in hills and shoot them all. Just take them out there and pile them up in the revere someplace and kill them. Now if you were poor enough and couldn't afford to buy meat to eat, you could go out there and they would they'd give you a couple of those old ewes, those old scrawny, skinny ewes that they shot and left to rot out in the hills. People, of course, were paid not to grow certain crops or only been in the last few years for a long time. It's only been in the last few years they quit doing that. They've taken land out of the soil Bank they called it. Quite paying people not to farm, but they did that because of the great surplus we had.

LJ: Over-abundance of things?

OMJ: Drove the price down. People couldn't make a living on a farm with the prices they were getting for what they were raising. So they paid them not to farm, or paid them not to raise hogs, or paid them not to raise sheep in order to raise the price of those commodities so that, the people who did raise them could make a living off of it.

LJ: The depression was quite a time and many learned really.

OMJ: Well, I think people were closer together. They were more friendly. Everybody was about in the same boat. Not very many people had much more than it took to live on. I think people were more in a mood to understand each other's problems; and therefore, they were more friendly. Had more time for each other even though in that day when we didn't have all the modern equipment and machinery, it took more time to do the same amount of work that we do now with the machinery. People still had more time to go and visit each other.

LJ: You spent more time with the family?

OMJ: They spent more time with the family and spent more time with neighbors. The church in recent years has instituted the Family Home Evening, but I look back and remember in my own family we had the same type of activity years and years ago.

LJ: It's the same thing.

OMJ: My dad was somewhat of an entertainer. He played the guitar and he chorded on the piano and he was a pretty good singer and he played mouth harp too. Many evening we sat around home and sang songs and he played guitar and the piano. Just had a real good time all by ourselves there at home. One of the things he used to do, he'd have one of us get up behind the mouth harp in front so he could play the mouth harp and play the guitar at the same time.

LJ: This tape will be placed in the library over at Ricks College and if you want to listen to it or something like that, placed there for future use. Those Family Home Evening, that's what they need to get more today and get us back together.

OMJ: I agree with that. I think people should learn to enjoy more of the simple things and things that they can do at home rather than to be forever looking for something to do.

LJ: That's right.

OMJ: Well, I hope I've given you something worthwhile.

LJ: You sure have! I understand some of the things you went through and times you had with your family and fun.

OMJ: Well, in spite of the hard times of the depression, I don't think too many people really felt that they were being abused or really felt like things were going against them. They knew they had to live and they made a living best way they could, just like people do now-a days. There were a lot of things we went without but still at the same time we sometime we didn't really suffer in this country so much especially. In some part of the country, I think there was a lot of suffering because in the cities, of course, there were a good many that didn't have anything to eat and wouldn't have had anything to eat without the bread lines. But that sort of thing, we didn't see in this part of the country.

LJ: Just wasn't there?

OMJ: No.