

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Caroline Pierce Burke - The Great Depression  
Years in Southeastern Idaho

By Caroline Pierce Burke

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Box 1 Folder 18

Oral Interview conducted by Robert Read

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This is oral history. I am Robert Read. Today is March 25, 1976. I am going to interview Caroline Pierce Burke, B-U-R-K-E. The general topic will be the Depression Years in the Snake River Valley.

Robert Read (RR): Mrs. Burke, where were you born?

Caroline Pierce Burke (CPB): In Annis, Idaho, on a farm, pioneer farm.

RR: How long have you lived in Iona?

CPB: I've lived here since 1916

RR: Where were your parents born?

CPB: My father was born in Liberty, Pennsylvania. He and his mother and little brother died on the plains coming to Utah. His little brother died on the plains, and his mother and his father separated and left my father with just his mother. His father got married and he went to live with him and his wife, whose name was Mary. Father, being the oldest of his mother's family, cared a lot about his mother and he tried to help all he could. He told me that he dug his mother her first well. He would live with his stepfather for a while and then he'd get kind of ornery and mean with him so then he would go back to his father. The first thing you know they'd come and get him and he'd go back to live them. So he didn't know where he belonged. I imagine he was a sort of a mixed up boy. But he went out and provided for himself in working in the timbers and things like this.

RR: What was your occupation?

CPB: Mine?

RR: Uh-huh!

CPB: My occupation?

RR: Ya!

CPB: My occupation was being in a good mother, a good Latter-Day Saints, and helping my husband in all that he stranded in need of and helping to provide for the children.

RR: What were the first years of the Depression like?

CPB: As I remember the first years of Depression, 1930, we didn't have much grain to harvest but we did have a little. Probably about two loads of wheat. Being the kind of people that we both were, we didn't suffer too much because we could always make do with what we had in raising a good garden and chickens and have our cow, and working as my husband could by helping others on P.T.A., P.W.A., or taking the men to and from work, making the roads and help laying the railroad here into Iona.

RR: Your husband was quite an industrious man!

CPB: Yes, he was, Bob.

RR: You were telling me about how he was always ready to work.

CPB: My husband was never without work very long. One time he went up to a farmer and he said, "Well I've just got to have work," it was wintertime and we had two children at this time. He said, "Will you give me a job?" Then the man said, "Well, I don't need you," and Elm says, "How much do you want?" and he said sixty dollars a month for four horses. He said, "That's too much, I just can't hire you." So my husband said OK that's alright, I'll get along. So he started down the road and he hollered at him and told him to come back. He said, "You've got a job." So he help haul the beet pulp from the factory to feed his sheep, feed this man's sheep.

RR: How was the farming during the Depression years?

CPB: We was new at dry farming and didn't know or understand that we should plow our land in the spring, and cultivate it during the summer, and then plant our wheat in the fall. After we did that, we were able to raise better crops. But we was handicapped because we only had horses to do the work, for we used to have later on, a tractor and cultivators.

RR: You raised quite a family!

CPB: We raised six lovely daughters and they've all married well and doing well in the church. We're really proud of our family. I have twenty-six grandchildren, about fifteen great grandchildren.

RR: how was it raising these, your daughters, during the depression years?

CPB: Raising my daughters during the depression years? It wasn't a hard task because we had always been used to getting along on what we had. I had to do a lot of extra making cover clothes and things like this. We carried our water from the ditch. We had to go about a block and a half to carry our water in a bucket and all our water in the house at that time. We didn't have electric washers; we have to scrub our clothes on the stove. We had to gather our own wood and our coal as well. We could afford to do our baking and heating our house and washing our clothes and cooking.

RR: You're going to tell me about this experience that happened back during those years with your husband and your daughter? He was buying coal?

CPB: My husband was a great man to work, he was industrious. If he had a job to do, he done it. At this time he figured that he had to work on a Sunday to make ends meet. So he would go up Sunday morning and get a load of coal from the Grind, Line Bull Coal Mine in Wyoming. He had to go up the Grays Canyon Dug way and it was awfully slick at this time. So as he came home this one Sunday evening, he was pretty discouraged because he wasn't getting ahead. Our

little daughters had been to sacrament meetings that night and as they came home they saw their father in this frame of mind and one little girl, ten, she decided that she would do something about it. So she, unbeknownst to us, she got an envelop and wrote on it and gave her father the advice of keeping the Word of Wisdom and the Sabbath Day holy. It was through this little girl doing this that he changed his life completely. He stopped working on Sunday. She promised him that if he would do this, that he would get out of debt and he would pay his bills and everything would work alright if he'd just do the Lord's will. She put this letter in his shoe and he got up at two o'clock. He got home at nine o'clock and was going back to the mine at two in the morning. As he got dressed, I had the fire going and his breakfast ready. He picked up his shoe and he saw that letter in his shoe and he threw it across the house. I said, "Isn't that something you want to take with you to the mine?" and he said nope. He was in a very cross mood. He was just in a very foul mood this time. So we read the letter, he said, "Oh that's what Sam done", or some other man that he knew in the ward, "That's who wrote that letter. We didn't know who wrote the letter for twenty-six years. One day when I was down to California, I was telling the Ward teachers about this strange letter. She (the daughter) said, "Mom, come in the kitchen, I've got something to tell you." She says "You know I wrote that letter." We didn't know where this came from, but it did have its bearings. He stopped working on Sunday and he was able to provide for our needs and get ahead and we've never been in need since. That's just through a little child guiding us.

RR: What about the times, I know, that money was scarce? What were the living standards like?

CPB: There were time when our living standards, money was hard to get. We had been used to getting along, and it didn't affect us very much because we could always make a way that we could provide got our needs if it was melting snow or going to the ditch or hauling our water from the canal. We didn't have any electricity. We had to do our own, gathering our wood and chopping it and bringing it into the house to keep our house warm. It was rough sometimes or sometimes their shoes got kind of thin but we always managed. We never suffered very much.

RR: You were probably pretty dependent on yourselves then during this time?

CPB: Yes, I think that with, through this rearing up in our early years, my husband knowing that a struggle it was to get food on the table and things, he grew up and me being, I myself having that same standard in my home coming into this valley in the 1800's we had to break the land of sagebrush. So we broke before we could put our crops in. Lots of times our crop would freeze and we had no other means but to eat the frozen bread, the wheat, we had the frozen bread from this dozen wheat. It wasn't very good bread. But we managed and we've always been grateful that we never suffered much from this because we could always mangle by making over clothes and working hard in our gardens, saving what we could. I think that's all.

RR: OK. What about, with the church, how was the church in the years?

CPB: The church, in my day when I was growing up as a child, sometimes we had primary and sometimes we didn't. We didn't have M.I.A. all the time. Living on the farm, it was kind of hard to get out and get down to these meetings. We didn't have the close contacts that we have today. So, I think that I did suffer from that because I would like to have been more active in the

church. You could learn this from your childhood on up. I think anyone should be given the chance to participate in the programs that's in the church. Sometimes the quiet ones always get the chance to set back while the others go ahead. I think that we should beware that we should help these quiet people in their lives so their lives will be better.

RR: How did you manage taxes and like doctor bills and things?

CPB: Doctor Bills? We didn't have very many doctors. Our parents being the pioneers, we relied on the Lord and on our knowledge of doctoring. In the valley, if one person was in need, we could always get help from our neighbors. When we had our children, we didn't go up to the doctors or the hospital. The ladies in our community would come in and help that patient. My mother was alone when I came into the world and my sister said she was ten at that time. She said all she could hear was a bawling baby.

RR: How was it with land?

CPB: The what?

RR: Land. I mean how much land did you have?

CPB: We had about six hundred and forty acres of states land and then we had a farm of a hundred and sixty. My husband and his father always worked on this land. He lived with us after his wife died. Uncle Burke was always a favorite in our household. He was so good to the children and he helped me many, many ways.

RR: I know that a lot of people lost their land during this time. Did you have any problems like that?

CPB: Our hundred and sixty acres was quite a distance from other farm. I don't know what happened to that land, whether we sold it. I believe it was taken on a mortgage that my father-in-law put on it, for he lost it. So that left us with just the state land. So we lived off that for a long time and then during the period of the World War, Second World War, my husband was trucking at this time and he was able to manage his farm and truck wheat for different people and haul coal for them. He was never out of a job.

Thank you very much. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.