

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

# Rex Catmull - The Depression in Idaho

By Rex Catmull

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## Box 1 Folder 21

Oral Interview conducted by Kim Nelson

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi April 2005

**Brigham Young University- Idaho**

KM: This is oral history. My name is Kim Nelson and I am interviewing Rex Catmull on the title of the Depression. Mr. Catmull where were you born?

RC: Idaho Falls, Idaho.

KN: And how long have you lived there?

RC: I left Idaho Falls when I was a baby. We moved to Burley, Idaho.

KN: And where'd you move from there?

RC: Well, I finished high school in Burley in 1936. Then I worked in various places in Idaho. I have been in what they call the Civilian Conservation Corps. Then I went to College and then to the service, and then to Utah; and then I moved to Rexburg about six years ago.

KN: Where were your parents born?

RC: My parents were born in Idaho Falls.

KN: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

RC: How many brothers and sisters do I have living? I have one brother and two sisters living.

KN: Okay, what is your occupation?

RC: My present occupation is owner and manager of the Rexburg Apartments. I am self-employed.

KN: During the depression where were you?

RC: During the depression 1929 I wasn't a teenager. My dad owned a bakery in Burley, Idaho and I remember during the 1929 I was quite young and my dad was approached by a group that said if he didn't sell to him that they would get another bakery. He sold to them and the next year the depression hit. It also forced them out of business. It was quite hard for our family at that time we had six children in the family and my father was seeking employment.

KN: What did the kids do for work? Did they do anything?

RC: Yes. In those days why it was mostly farming work although, we lived in the city area of Burley. The kids picked potatoes to help. Different than what it is today. At that time they paid only 2¢ cents a sack. You would go along straddling hardness with an open sack between your legs and go down the spud rows and put the spuds into the sack and by the time you got it filled up and you made 2¢.

KN: How much did you average then a day?

RC: Some only made a dollar by the end of the day. If you started early in the morning and worked till late at night you got \$2.

KN: Did your mom do anything to help you? Did she do any sewing or cooking or things like that?

RC: Mother had her hands full taking care of the young family and father was doing various chores around for some of the merchants. And helping part-time in another bakery.

KN: Was food pretty cheap?

RC: Food was very reasonable. Like I say you could buy 100lbs of potatoes at that time for about 30¢.

KN: Well, how much was gasoline?

RC: Gasoline was around 28¢ gallon. Of course, sugar at that time was very reasonable, about 5¢ a lb.

KN: You said you lived in the city and so did you have to pay rent or did you own the place you lived in?

RC: We were purchasing our own home. A frame home, but a very modest home. It was located just west of a nice park, and we weren't too far from the city center. Of course, at that time it was fairly small town of a little over, 2,000.

Times were difficult, yet it seems that the people would help one another and there was plenty to eat. I especially remember families getting together and having, not been concerned about prices because they say they put on some big feasts and at the same time why there was more visiting among the relatives and friends than I notice today. People enjoyed the outdoor recreation and fishing and that too, even though cars aren't as nice as what they are today. It was very difficult for young people to think of college because there wasn't the GI Bill, or grants or scholarships.

Quite a number of young men rode the rails half the time. You get in or under the freight car and ride the rails, looking for work. It was a very trying time for employment.

KN: There was taxes, like you pay for your house. Did you have to pay very much tax?

RC: There wasn't the taxes that we have today like the income taxes, hardly any taxes. At that present time there was quite a problem with the presidential race. In 1932 President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that there would be a chicken in every pot, there would a car

for everybody, and he promised everything. Once he got in, why he did create a number of considerable federal jobs, but we did notice erosion in the purchasing power of our dollar. That they say he could bring the country out of depression.

At that time I went into, this was in the later years. I graduated from high school; I went into Civilian Conservation Corps. This was a government program for young men to go into the forest to build roads and clean out the timber and help to provide recreational facilities. I was at Salmon River in French Creek, Idaho and we received \$30 a month, board and keep.

KN: Did you send any money while you earned home?

RC: Well, I saved \$125 in about six months. I came to Ricks College in 1937 and that \$125 was enough money to see me through, at that time we had quarters instead of semesters for three months. I was able to go two quarters, six months to school. It provided for my tuition, my food, and my lodging. At that time we lived in the building that formerly was across from Taylor Chevrolet just west-that was recently torn down last year.

It was somewhat of cooperative house. The girls lived in the upstairs part and the boys lived on the lower floor. The kitchen became a cooperative area where times they would bring meat, potatoes, carrots, and the boys and girls under the supervision of the cook, would prepare these meals and act as waiters and waitresses. Of course, at that time Ricks College only had an enrollment of 300 students. But when school was finished I went to work on a dry farm in Swan Valley area, and I worked for a dollar a day and my board. I would work about 14 hours a day, long days. I had enough money for the fall semester.

Then economy began to pick up because of threat of war in Europe. I graduated from Ricks College in 1939 and quite a number of people were heading to California to work in the air craft industries. It seemed pretty eminent that were tooling up for the war industry and this, of course, brought the nation out of depression.

KN: When did the depression really start? Well like in your family when did it?

RC: The depression actually started in the latter part of 1929. October of 1929 is when the stock market crashed. I can remember how they, in the early 30's how they were slaughtering animals because they had a surplus of them pack them in a trough and bury them over. They had a surplus of grain, and had a surplus of commodities. It was difficult as well as for the people in the city.

It was costing considerable sums to produce the food, considering what they were being paid for. They didn't have a world wide problem of hunger at that time as we do today. I can remember in high school only one student had automobile. He had an older car that he fixed, but thing were such financially why parents of the students or the students themselves weren't able to find enough money or work for enough to buy themselves a car. It was strange that I should remember that the student having a car. He was a good

friend of mine. He now owns an auto wrecking yard in Burley, he's done very well. That car started him on to acquiring more wrecks I guess.

It was interesting to go over the time I spent in the Civilian Conservation Corps. I hoped to have enough money to send me to college so I had to go to work. We were building a road up the Salmon River. It was from Rigging, Idaho and the other end. Why they were building a road from Salmon, Idaho down the Salmon River towards conjunction with our camp. In 1939 when war seemed eminent they discontinued the building of the road. It never was completed. It could have been a tremendous scenic road. Beautiful area. But today with the environmental protection act, why such roads wouldn't be permitted. Of course, that road never will be completed. It is still possible to go to Riggins up the Salmon and then take off from what called French Creek up to Switch Back and over to McCall, Idaho. If you get a chance to make that trip it's a beautiful ride.

The depression, they say, was such that people seemed to be more close knit at that time then they are now. Actually with the phenomenal growth of Ricks College, at that time, there were only the two buildings at Ricks College. The Spori building-what do they call the other one now?

KN: The Auditorium?

RC: No, the old stone building.

KN: I don't know.

RC: Well, its where our gymnasium was that one still in the top of that building. Ricks College was quite famous for its basketball teams. They never did have a very strong football team cause we didn't have big students, but have a tremendous basket team. And I can remember them, but I broke my wrist and so I never did. We have some crowds at the basket games that shake that whole building down. I often wondered how it ever withstood the tremendous attendance they had in that small gymnasium there.

KN: Did a lot of banks around your close?

RC: Oh yes. I remember my dad telling me about the banks. There were some people which were hurt very seriously with the banks that closed down. They had confidence in the banks. My father was able, with planning and purchase of some kind, he was able to withdraw. I think he lost \$1,000, but he withdrew most of his money. He was going to make a purchase for something else. So we were very fortunate. Quite a number were hurt with back closures.

KN: Did he buy any land with the money or anything with it?

RC: No it just helped to keep the family together on paying the mortgage. But I can remember how the school teachers, even when I was in the early 30's, I can remember how they kept talking about script. They were paid in what they called warrants.

Warrants were issued to them as a check for salary. They weren't good till it was determined that there was enough money in the treasury or the country or taxes to cash those checks. Sometimes they had to discount them in order to get their money. In other words, school teacher at that time was lucky to make \$70 a month, or even \$50.

KN: What would you say would be the luckiest guy in the deal as far as work, or what kind of work?

RC: The man that seemed to be envied at that time was the postal employee or the man that had two years as a government employee. He didn't have to worry about getting his salary or tickets, money came. The postal employees, that same, very fortunate. My folks encouraged me to get into postal service. I took the test and I passed. I was supposed to receive my appointment before I left for the service, but a married man took over and so I went into the service.

KN: Do you think that war helped the economy quite a bit?

RC: Well, I don't know if the war helped the economy any. I think there would have been a way out of it. I don't know all the ins and outs of the economic thing about the tariff barriers and the trade restrictions and everything else that were created.

The other day- I don't think we should oppose those restrictions on other countries, but, of course, there are some right now that are hurting the cattle industry and the milk industry so on. I think as a whole, why people seemed to be in a sense more spiritually minded than possibly they are today because they were very thankful for what they did have.

KN: Did your dad have to pay very much on his house payments monthly?

RC: No, at that time interest rates weren't as bad as they are right now. We did have to dip up sizeable down payment in order to make the house payments to obtain the house. It was a little more difficult to finance the mortgaging like you do now. The bank wanted more security where as today why, the government protects the banks. The lender seems to be protected more today. We had some good times when things were tough and tight.

KN: Did your dad buy your house before the depression or during it?

RC: No dad bought the house before the depression.

KN: How many years?

RC: I remember we moved from one house to the one I recall—grade school-Jr. High, high school. He bought it, it was about two years before the crash came 1929. It was a nice house, a two story house. It was frame, like I say a nice home.

KN: Did the government have other programs besides the one you talk about?

RC: Oh yes. At that time they had what you'd call the WPA and PWA which is what they call Works Projects Administration and the other one was Public Works Assistance, where they would give men out of work employment; and often times they would have, oh, city improvements projects or may be they'd build a new courthouse or office or new government building of some kind. Or they might even work on the Bureau of Reclamation, where they have them cleaning canals to provide for even flow of waters.

There were numerous government agencies that would provide employment for these men who were out of work. There use to be a standing joke about it where they'd remark at one time that seven day WPA project that they'd want to take a picture of the men working and they had to take a still photo of it because nobody was moving! They were all standing around leaning on their poles, shovels, and rakes. At that time quite a number of men-it sometimes hurt some men's pride to accept a job with the WPA because they wanted to be self-sufficient, they didn't want hand outs, but they didn't have any choice they accepted WPA work gladly.

The pattern of things changed when Hitler came into power and started to over run countries in Europe. America began to tool up for war, and quite a number of men started going into defense plants. The war actually was declared in December 7, 1941. Prior to that though they say why our government was helping Great Britain and France by building tanks and bombers and ships and anything to help their allies. I spent four years in the service, quite a number of my friends were killed, and to this day I still wonder why I was spared.

They say that there couldn't be another depression, but they possible could be wrong because sometimes history repeats itself. Time will run back as someone once said. Of course, this is where the church admonishes its members to be prepared, and have a year's supply of food. Now some things I do have- you can understand why we need to be prepared.

In summary like I say... I got, the other day I got a hold of a record here that not the kind of music they play now-a days. It's called Glenn Miller, its one that was real popular (play record) just before the war and this type of music seems to be coming back today, how do you like that kind of music?

KN: Sounds like from the twenties.

RC: This ones Tommy Dorsey and Arty Shaw. Doesn't that music make more sense that your rock-n-roll today?

KN: I don't know! Did you think during the depression the music guys who made music and records would make money too?

RC: No, not like they do today, because you have the technical and logical things you've got today like your T.V. at home, your FM and AM radios, your stereos and hifi and things like this.

KN: During the depression did you have a refrigerator and a stove and everything?

RC: Oh yes.

KN: Electric stove or gas?

RC: During the depression we had an electric stove and we had a electric refrigerator. We had plenty of food items. We really appreciated the help we got from friends that were farmers. We had quite a number of people growing gardens. Everyone had a garden.

KN: What are your plans in the future?

RC: My plans, I don't know. That is very difficult to determine. I have the Rexburg Apartment. Now they are used to be the old Idamont Hotel. It had quite a reputation and we're changing it over to apartment, and realizing the old hotel was not... On my own personal standpoint I appreciated people-when we first took it over six years ago we had problem with the people using it as the lost weekend. They'd get drunk, come in and sleep it off, fall asleep in bed with a cigarette almost burn the hotel down with matches catching on fire.

The experiences we've had here with drunks and transients had been enough to make another story. You have to be pretty patient with both the drunks and some of these students are difficult to get along with now, but the students are certainly a much better group when than what we had in those. As I say it had a reputation. We are changing and improving it- the Idamount Hotel to Rexburg Apartments and making it off limits to people that smoke and drink and carouse.

You ask me what my plans to the future are. I hope that within a few years why I can turn it over to some young man that is interested in it for providing good college housing for Ricks students.