

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Joseph F. Belnap-Experiences of the Depression

By Joseph F. Belnap

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Box 1 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Doug Piper

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This is Oral History. I am Doug Piper. Today is March 26, 1974, I am interviewing Joseph F. (Frank) Belnap. The general topic is life in the 30's.

DP: Where were you born?

JB: On the farm (his fathers) October 28, 1899.

DP: Have you lived here all your life?

JB: Within the general area.

DP: Where were your parents born?

JB: My father was born in Ogden, Utah, and my mother was born in West Weber, Utah.

DP: When did they move here?

JB: They moved here in 1886. They lived two years in Wilford. Then moved down here.

DP: Your fathers general occupation was a farmer all his life.

JB: Yes. My father was a farmer.

Read from journal:

In the spring of 1930, the Bishop Tanner was transferred to other work, and I was released as his counselor. We left a few days later with our cows for Kilgore, Idaho. We spent most of the summer there. I was released from being scout master at that time. The next fall, I was put in as Van Guard leader.

The summer of 1930, when we was out at Kilgore, was one of the driest summers, ever in this country. We had plenty of work. We had nine cows, worked nine hours in the saw mill and returned home about the first of August. The decline of prices began and things gradually grew worse. 1931 was no better. Prices were worse and droughts were serious. We ran out of water about July 12, and we had no rain. In the fall of 1930, I contracted to buy fifty acres of farm. Couldn't make the payment in 1931, so I lost it. Crops look fine this year, prices don't, and it is pretty hard for everybody. I was elected a director for the Santa Union Canal Company, and we found things pretty bad. July 6, 1935. Its been a long time again since I wrote in this book. Well, things went from bad to worse. Wheat went to 24¢ a bushel, cows sold for six dollars a piece, horses fifteen dollars, pigs two dollars, eggs 8¢ a dozen. In the fall of 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt, a democrat was elected president of the United States. In March of 1934, prices started up. Now everything is looking pretty fair. The winter of 1933-34 was like spring. No snow and warm. The summer of 1934 was the worst drought this

country ever had. The crops that were planted early, were burned ripe, and the crops that were planted late burned up.

DP: Could I ask you a question? Did you notice at that time, was it just the farmers that were having trouble, or pretty much everybody?

JB: I think it was pretty much everybody. There were banks going broke all over the country.

DP: Do you think it was an advantage living on the farm? Did you have pretty much everything you needed?

JB: Well, we got by. Let's put it that way. We got by.

DP: Better than the people in the city then?

JB: Better than lots of them did.

DP: When the banks in Rexburg crashed, did you have quite a bit of money at first that you lost.

JB: Not personally I didn't. Our scout troop did. It had money in the bank at Sugar city and we lost that.

Here in Rexburg, I jumped the gun on that and seen things were getting bad and went and withdrew all my money out of the banks. So I didn't lose nothing personally. I didn't have much to lose anyway.

DP: Of your friends, did anyone get caught pretty bad, -as far as the banks closing.

JB: Well, there was a lot of people that lost pretty near everything they owned.

DP: I was wondering, did the things you ate change very much? In the thirty's were you able to get pretty much the same foods you always had?

JB: Well, pretty much the same. Ya didn't get to much different in those days anyway. I think the majority of the people fared pretty good as far as eating is concerned. The crops weren't worth nothing, ya couldn't sell it to buy anything extra.

DP: Did it seem to ya that, you had better crops, but got less money for them? Is that the way it was?

JB: That's about the size of it. Course, we did have those two years of practically drought.

DP: On the drought, did it pretty much ruin the crops for the whole year? You mentioned that you usually had about two crops of hay.

JB: Usually had two crops of hay, first and second crop of hay. First crop of hay was all we got. On the place where we had been getting 175 tons of hay we got 70 tons of hay.

DP: That pretty much ruined you for the whole year then, huh?

JB: Yes, that really worked a lot of hardships for the whole year. For more than one reason. Many people had stock to feed, and a lot of stock died cause they didn't have enough to feed them. I think around that time they shipped hay in and it would run about \$50 a ton if you could afford to buy it.

DP: At that time did you grow most of your own hay, or did you have to buy some?

JB: That one year we did have to buy some. The drought made it so you had to buy more then. You couldn't get a hold of it. I think it was only about the one year that we ever had to buy hay and that was when the drought was so bad.

DP: What did F.D.R.'s programs, did they help out around here too much or were they set up in here?

JB: Well, they had the employment deal. They built roads. They had a day so ya could work on the road. They graveled and graded some roads. So many days out of the month in the wintertime we could work on the road.

DP: You farmed all your life?

JB: Yes.

DP: Did it ever get bad enough at that time that you'd pick up another job outside or other than farming?

JB: Well, in the thirties there was no other job to pick up.

DP: There was no other jobs around?

JB: In the wintertime, sometimes we could pick up jobs at the sugar factory, if there was any. Sometimes we would work there for a month or so.

DP: Did you usually on a normal year employ other people on your farm here?

JB: No. We usually done about all the work ourselves on the farm. Hauling they hay and thrashing we'd have to have a little help sometimes, but that's about the size of it.

DP: What was some of the early jobs, first jobs that your children had?

JB: Well, I think that probably the first job the children was working and helping in the hay and grain and sometimes they would help the neighbors. In fact, most all of us changed work with the neighbors in those days. Our thrashing crew usually ran about seven teams of horses and wagons. Four men in the field pitching grain and the bagger and a few others on the thrashing machine. Took quite a crew to thrash in those days.

DP: So pretty much changed off, you'd work on one farm, and then you'd go to the next?

JB: That's right. We'd go from one farm to another. Pretty much the same.

Mrs. Belnap: You fed the thrashers, Frank.

DP: You did!

MB: You had to cook for those thrashers, the whole gang.

DP: I imagine that was a pretty big job.

MB: Yes.

DP: Did it take you all day?

JB: Lots of times, early in the year, why they would come for breakfast, and stay for supper.

DP: Would you spend all day cooking?

MB: Thank goodness they don't do that now!

DP: Did you ever pack the meals out to the fields?

JB: No.

DP: They always came to the house then. It was close enough. What was the most you ever fed for a thrashing crew?

JB: Well, about a dozen.

MB: Hungry thrashers!

DP: What were some of the things that you could do for entertainment, at that time?

JB: Well, I think that a lot of it in those days was house parties. They'd go to different homes and play games and things like that. I think a lot of it was that kind of entertainment.

DP: Do you remember what the population of Rexburg was at that time?

JB: No.

DP: Anywhere close? Pretty small yet?

JB: Well, it wasn't as big as it is now, by golly. Take for instance here, we've lived here all our lives and there is more people we don't know than people we do. I think generally in the wintertime the work was mostly in the sugar factory and feeding stock besides your own farm work. That's most of it. Some people would work in the sawmills.

DP: Have you noticed the difference in the price of stock and wheat and things over the years, in comparison to how much you would personally make off of it? Has it gone better or worse or can you really tell?

JB: Well, the last two or three years prices have gone up quite a bit and there has been profit, there is no questions about it. And another thing that made a change, in that is the equipment you work with. You do most of the work without having to hire anybody. But, your equipment is pretty expensive stuff. That gets worse every year.

DP: You feel right now that you're better off right now as far as year to year profit?

JB: Oh, yes, yes.

DP: What were some of the hardships that you can remember having to go without?

JB: Well really, I think most of our problem was going without coal, for instance for a while we had to chop a lot of wood. That was not problem, we was use to that anyway. Probably, didn't eat as lavishly as people do now-a-days. We nearly always had out own meat on the farm. We would raise our own meat and stuff like that. We'd raise chickens and pigs and things like that. You wouldn't have to go out and buy eggs, we always had it.

DP: So you feel that you really didn't hurt that bad as far as thing were going? There really wasn't things that you needed that you couldn't get?

JB: Well, I think that we could get about anything we had money to get with.

DP: Were there very many families around this area that couldn't make it? That had to have outside help?

JB: Well, there was quite a few of them that lost their property, but I don't think there was too many that had to have too much help as a family to get by on.

DP: Were the banks the ones who took the property?

JB: The banks were one thing that going broke make it pretty hard for a lot of people. Then too, when they set up this federal land bank business, that's one thing that helped us all out. Now, there was a mortgage on my place. When we bought it, about 1934, the mortgage company wrote me a letter and wanted to know, which I'd rather do-foreclose on me or have me deed over to them.

I wrote back and asked who they wanted me to deed it to. They wrote back and said that we don't want your place. We'll work out something you can work for. I think the mortgage company took about a \$1400 loss on my place to fix it so we could keep the land. So they was in a bind, just like everybody else, and they would take what they could get and get out of it.

DP: How many acres did you have at that time?

JB: We have only 37 now, and dad's farm we had 120 acres on the farm.

DP: So that's pretty fair size compared to most of the farms in this area now isn't it.

JB: Yes, see we lost 80 acres of it during the depression.

DP: From the depression?

JB: Yea.

DP: I bet that land today is worth quite a bit though that you lost then. That land today that you lost then if you had a few dollars to keep it with today it would be worth a lot more.

JB: Oh, I should say it would. Yea, it would be ten times more.

DP: About what time were your children born? Can you tell me a little about them? What time they were born and when they started growing up?

JB: Well, our first girl was born in September, the year after we was married. The second boy was born the seventh of July three years later. We had five children all together, but the third one was born on her (Mrs. Belnap's) birthday. That's the one birthday present I had to pay for! We lost our last two babies. One lived an hour and a half and the other lived for two weeks.

DP: So your oldest child would have been about ten to twelve in the mid-thirties?

JB: She was born March 22, 1924. She would have been school age.

DP: Do you think there was much of a difference as far as bringing her up than it would have been the others? As far as, was it easier for her to get clothes and things for her? She's a little bit ahead of the others, but not that much. I guess a year or two.

MB: We made the clothes for the kids.

DP: Was it pretty much a case of have to or, just was it better to do that?

MB: Yes, it was easier for our pocket book.

DP: (Mrs. Belnap) Did you make your own clothes too?

MB: Not mine. Once in a while I make my house dresses you know, but not any Sunday dresses.

JB: I think a lot of the Sunday dresses was made at home too.

MB: Yes, about that time.

DP: Did you notice a decline or incline of people going to church at that time or less people or was there much difference?

JB: Really I think as a whole there was more people going to church than now a days. But within the last two years there might be a little more going now than there was then.

MB: Yes, we have big crowds now.

DP: In other words, do you think the depression brought more people together or was it just something that happened?

JB: Oh, I think the depression put us all in the same boat. Generally speaking. I think that people were generally fair about going to church and things like that.

DP: Could I ask you personally what you felt about Franklin Roosevelt? Did you think he was a good President or bad President, or what do you say?

JB: Personally I thought he done the country a lot of good. This federal land bank, a few things like that, if it would have been for that this country would have been in a lot worse predicament. It was during that time that things started changing and they was making these public work jobs and stuff like that, that helped people out also. He may have made a lot of mistakes, like I don't know most presidents made a few, they're humans. You can find people who'll say he was a poor president.

DP: What did you think about the things going on in Europe in the thirties? Were you aware of that and did it bother you very much? Did you think about it much at all?

JB: Well, I don't think it bothered us much really. I noticed some of the records I wrote in here: The world is full of wars again. We hope we can stay out of it.

DP: Were you surprised when we did go to war in 1941 or did your views change? Did you still want to stay out of it?

JB: Well, I've never seen a time when I'd like to go to war. I never did serve in the army or anything. I, in the first world war in 1919, I registered in the last registration. I was in class A-1 number for drawing when the armistice was signed.

MB: Our boy was in the Second World War. He served in 1945.

DP: Did he see action then or was it when the war was over?

JB: He went out in the tail end to haul the troops back home.

DP: I'll bet you were relieved?

MB: Yes.

DP: When he was growing up and war was going on, did you have problems keeping him home, from wanting to go off to the war or anything like that?

JB: The only problem was that he didn't want to go.

DP: Was there any boys from around here who did right at first of the war that went in or being, you know, pretty much a L.D.S. area, you know, did most of them stay home or was there a few that went in or not?

JB: Several of them from Salem did go in. in fact, one or two from Salem lost their lives.

DP: Thanks.