

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Ray E. Clarke- The Depression in Idaho

By Ray E. Clarke

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Oral Interview conducted by Craig Talbot

Transcribed by Sarah McCoristin January 2005

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This is an oral history. I am Craig Talbot. Today December 13, 1974 I am going to interview Mr. Ray Clarke. The general topic will be the Depression years.

Craig Tolbot: Mr. Clarke where were you born?

Ray E. Clarke: I was born in Rexburg, Idaho, Madison County.

CT: How long have you lived in Madison County?

RC: Well, I lived here up until 1929, then there was a space in time when I was away from here and then later that I was back for five years before 1939. Then in 1945 I returned to Rexburg and lived here for the rest of my life. Except for those two intermissions I lived in Rexburg all of my life.

CT: Where were your parents born?

RC: My father was born in Utah and my mother was born in Bear Lake, Idaho.

CT: What was your occupation during the depression years?

RC: Well, in 1929 I went on a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The depression hit shortly after that. I returned home in the spring of 1932 after having spent 27 months in the mission field. Things were quite bleak in the Snake River Valley. When I left it was at the height of prosperity and I had seen a great deal of prosperity and I had seen a great deal of prosperity in the Snake River Valley. But in the intervening years, from the spring of 1932 until I would say along 1935 or 36 before things began to really pick up. In fact, during this period I went to Ricks for two years after returning from my mission.

One winter I worked for \$30 a month, ten hours a night, clerking for the Idahmont Hotel. The next winter I worked a \$2,40 a shift for eight hours at the Sugar Factory. The jobs were almost impossible to come by.

While I was in the mission field I saw as many as four or five thousand people standing in line to receive a slice of bread and a bowl of soup. Believe me you see that many people standing in line and you realize that conditions are bad. But things were not so terrible. We had to help others living in a Latter-day Saint community like the Snake River Valley. I do not believe that anybody suffered a great deal because we did produce a lot of food. We did not have any extra money to spend on clothes. I saw them wear them until they were nothing but rags. There was a lot of poverty in other parts of the country. The Snake River Valley, this section of it at least, has been quite a blessed community and we helped one another a great deal. There wasn't any real suffering here from the depression like there was in some big cities.

CT: What were working conditions?

RC: It was almost impossible to get a job, but I was always fortunate in having jobs. In 1934 I got a job for Morrison & Knudson Construction Company in the Yellowstone Park. And the men worked for what they called the NRA- worked for five hour shifts. It was not very long after I went to work that I became a foreman for them and began working 10 hour shifts. I had one crew in the morning and one in the afternoon. These men worked for about \$2.55 a day. They paid \$1.10 for room and board to the company, we were fortunate to getting on that kind of job.

Most farmers were employing men around this section of the country for \$30 to \$35 a month. Forty dollars was top wages. Some stores paid \$50 to \$60 a month. Between \$1.75 to \$2.00, \$2.25 a day was top wages with these stores. I mean on monthly bases.

CT: What type of work were you doing in Yellowstone?

RC: In Yellowstone we were building roads. I worked on the construction of roads. The first job I worked on was between Old Faithful Inn and Madison Junction just off the hill to Madison Junction. About 17 ½ miles of road in there.

CT: You said that you attended Ricks College. How was Ricks College during the depression?

RC: Well, I believe there was about-if I can remember correctly-about 200 to 230 students at Ricks College and lots of them paid their tuition later on as I did myself. Mother being a widow I had to help out quite a bit in my own household. But there was always warm feeling and we provided for our own entertainment. In fact, in those days we went to a show probably once a week at the most because there just was not the money. There wasn't the money to do anything.

In fact, I came back from my mission in April of 1932 and you could up to Main Street, look up Main Street and if you could see five cars parked on Main Street it was a busy day. That's an actual fact, it never hit me quite so hard until I came into town and saw two or three cars on Main Street when I returned off my mission. It was a Saturday. On Saturday was the only day farmers would come to town to do shopping and that would be on Saturday's. Probably to buy sugar, salt, pepper and the very menial things. Most farmers had to use their own wheat and they would take it to the grist mill to grind the flour up and would pay them for gristing the flour out.

CT: What were the main projects on the farm, how did they do during the depression, the equipment, etc.?

RC: Well, after the depression there were very few farmers that owned their own farms. They had so many mortgages that they were mortgaged so heavily that hundreds of farms had to change hands and went in to receivers. In lots of cases though the receivers would rather they stay there and try to work the thing out. If there was any possible way of them working it out. In along about between 1934 and 35 lots of the farmers bought their mortgages off for 25 cents on the dollar. The mortgage holders were glad to get that at

one time. When the town had three thousand people we had three banks here, but two of them closed their doors, and people lost quite a lot of money, there was many such conditions.

CT: What was the price of farm equipment?

RC: Well, there wasn't very much of it being sold. They were patching it up in every way, shape and form. Of course, the equipment at that time was all horse-drawn equipment, binders; about the only kind of equipment we had that was power driven was the steam thrash machine. On our farm just prior to that time we had a little cylinder gas engine to run the pump with. We thought it was quite a marvel. Very few people had refrigerators, electric stoves, electric washers, anything like that. All electricity that 95% of the houses had electricity at any time on the farm. On our farms at that time which was being run by renters, I would say, along in the 40's before any electricity was brought to the farm.

CT: How did working men that could not get a job get along?

RC: The PWA was instigated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And that was the Public Work Administration and they did such jobs as hauling gravel out of the gravel pit with team and wagon, shoveling along by hand and improving our county roads. Porter Park was on of the big projects in Rexburg. This was built during that period of time. Trees were planted and that the city got money I guess from the government for most of the trees. Two or three school houses were built in the county with PWA workmen. That's people who could not possibly get a job, who had no other ways of making a living. We did a lot of work to beautify our community and to make it a proposition we used the money to a good advantage. There was not any kickbacks or anything like that on the PWA work project. It was handled almost on the up and up all the way through. One winter I worked for two or three weeks on the PWA project. But I was usually fortunate to have a job that I didn't have to take PWA money.

CT: Could you tell me the pay that was instigated by the Morrison & Knudson?

RC: Well, most of the jobs in the Valley here were for Morrison & Knudson Construction Company. I had the privilege of working for them. I put in one year in Yellowstone Park and part of another season there and then went to the Fort Peck Dam, that was during the NRA time and the workmen received 55 cents an hour and I worked five hours a day, I had a foremen job so I worked ten hours a day for that ten hours a day I got \$100 a month-board and room. Transportation was furnished to me, whenever I changed one job, and all my expenses were paid after I went on a monthly payroll. But the average man, the truck drivers on the job was making \$2.65 for a five hour day and the common laborer was making in a day a five hour day and the common laborer was making \$2.55 for a five hour day.

Hundreds of men would have like to have those jobs. I just happened to live in the area and applied for work on any public work project. There were regular contracts. But

being as I lived in this area, I was able to get a job with them and with the men in the locality were getting \$1 a \$1.50, \$2 top wages for eight and ten hours of work. Of course, I worked myself for that \$100 a month. I worked ten hours a day. I had two crews on n the morning and one in the afternoon. I ate lunch on the go! Because the one shift would lead the other.

CT: Well, I sure appreciated talking to you Mr. Clarke. I really appreciated the comments you gave me.

RC: Well, you're certainly welcome.

CT: This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.