Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Clarence D. Simmons-Experiences of the Depression

By Clarence D. Simmons

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Box 2 Folder 37

Oral Interview conducted by Bonnie Lloyd

Transcribed by Sarah McCoristin February2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is oral history. I'm Bonnie Loyd. Today, February 14, 1976, I'm going to interview Mr. Clarence D. Simmons. The general topic will be the Depression Years.

Bonnie Lloyd: Mr. Simmons, where were you born?

Clarence D. Simmons: I was born in Raymond, Alberta, Canada, January 18, 1912.

BL: How long have you lived here in Grace, Idaho?

CS: I've lived here since August of 1937.

BL: When were your parents born?

CS: My parents were born in 1876 and 1879. Dad was born in Woodruff, Utah. Mother was born in Layton, Utah.

BL: What have been your occupations?

CS: I grew up on a farm, then I've taught school, and been a principal of the school, and now I'm Superintendent of Schools. I also have operated a Ready Mix business and I've been manager for the Grace Theatre since 1937, excuse me, 1967.

BL: Being a young man at the beginning of the Depression, what did you do. Did you work or did you find jobs easy?

CS: Well, when I was just nine years old I got a job with my brother thinning beets in the spring, and we would thin for about six weeks. Then along about that same time I herded cows out on the flat between Burley and Oakley. I got a nickel a head a day, and that was pretty good wages for a nine year old kid.

BL: A nickel a day?

CS: Per head. I had a herd of; I usually ran right around a hundred head a day. Sometimes we'd go a little over that, sometimes a little under, but I usually had about that any cattle to take care of out on that flat, out toward Oakley between Burley and Oakley, above the canal.

BL: And you said you went on a mission? Where did you go on your mission?

CS: Yes, I went back to Illinois, Indiana. Mainly, I spent most of my time in Illinois and Southern Indiana. I was also in Michigan, but it was just, I took a display up there to the county fair, and I was only there about two weeks.

BL: What did you do when you got back home to Idaho?

CS: Well I got back in September of 1933. I tried to get a job for the city of Burley, but in talking with the Mayor there, he asked me who my dad was and I told him John S. Simmons, and he said, " Well, there a lot of people that were worse off than John S. Simmons." So I didn't get a job. But we did haul hay into the feed yards there and made a little money. Then Mr. Monch came up from Henegar Business College and offered to take a half a beef fro my sister and my tuition at Henegar Business College. So dad gave him the half of beef and we went down there and went to school. Within four months my sister was married and that left me down there all by myself. So after six months, why Mr. Monch asked me if I'd be interested in part time teaching there. So I taught for a half a day for a couple of months, and then he put me on full time teaching. I taught there from 1934 until 1936. Then I decided to go back to the University of Utah and finish my college work. So in January of 1936 I went back and took my Degree and graduated in 1937. Previously, I'd attended Albion State Normal School at Albion, and University of Washington in 1929 that the market crashed, stock market, and it affected the city of Seattle quite a bit. However, I was living there with my brother who happened to be an attorney, and I went out there one year in '29 and '30. but I was there when the October crash came in the Stock Market.

BL: How were the people? Did they just all get depressed? I've heard lots of stories about people killing themselves.

CS: Oh yes, there were quite a few suicides. People were wiped out, many of them in the market. My dad was never a very big investor. He lost money in what was know as the Golden Age Mine. It turned out to be a rock pile over in Colorado, and he put a couple of thousand dollars into that and never did get anything out of it. But he was quite a dedicated person. He had made the statement that he would give all of us children a college education and then we would have to go it from there on our own. Most of the boys, in fact all of the boys, graduated from college. The girls, most of them got married along the way.

BL: How many were in your family?

CS: There were eleven of us, four boys and seven girls. Ten of us are still living after these many years. I had one sister pass away in 1924. I was just a youngster and we went, I remember that was about the first time I'd ever been back to Utah since we'd left there in 1917. We went back in 1924 and she was buried in Layton in the Kaysville Cemetery there in Layton, Utah. My parents have both since passed away and they've been buried there.

BL: They were born in Utah before?

CS: Yes, they were born and reared in Utah. We left Utah in 1917. It's rather interesting about my birth really. At the time, in 1911 and 1912, dad had been ranching up in Teton Basin. He had about a hundred sixty acre homestead up there. Lots of good fishing, dry farming and so forth. He was quite a grower of horses. My mother's folks, my mother's sister, and some of her brothers had gone from Layton up to settle in

Raymond Alberta, Canada. She decided in January to go up there on a visit, visit her sister. It was while she was visiting that I was born. I think it was kind of planned that way that she would be there with her sister when birth took place. I only lived there five weeks, first five weeks of my life. So I have no recollections of Canada except as I went back there in 19521. Visited some of my relatives and saw the little town of Raymond, which was laid out very well with broad streets and wide streets. But dad never saw fit to settle there. He came back from Canada in the spring of 1912 until 1917. then we moved from Layton out to Burley, Idaho. He bought an eighty acre irrigated ranch there which my nephew still owns, about five and a half miles from Burley.

BL: Well, what did you raise on the farm mostly?

CS: Well it was a row crop farm. We grew up thinning lots of beets and hoeing beets, topping beets by hand, and then potatoes. We would nearly always grow from twenty to twenty-five acres of potatoes on the farm. Dig them with a single row digger and pick them up by hand in baskets, and then dup them in the sacks, gunny sacks, burlap.

BL: That's a slow day!

CS: Well the neighbor lady across the street was quite a potato picker, and when I reached my teen years, along about fifteen and sixteen, she was picking alone one day and dumping her potatoes in so she said, "Clarence, do you want to pick with me and we'll dump together?" She was so much faster than anyone else in the field I didn't know whether I could keep up with her or not. But I was at that age where I was growing a little bit, so I decided to give it a try. We agreed that if I couldn't keep up in one day that she'd go back and pick alone. So I put on about all the speed I could to keep up with her, and we picked 400 half sacks a day on the average, from then on until the potatoes were all picked up. She was the only one that I ever picked with and after that about ever fall we picked together.

BL: Well how were farm prices during the Depression?

CS: Well, there were two, really two Depressions. After World War I, 1923 in our area, we had a real farm Depression. We had five banks close in Burley alone in 1923, and it was rough. I went to a grade school out in the country, that was just a mile from our home, and we'd take the short cut to walk diagonally to this grade school. In the fall of 1923, we walked across potato patches that were never dug, because the price had dropped. During the World War I, the price of potatoes had gone quite high. We though five dollars a hundred was a real price fro potatoes at that time. When they dropped to about 23 cents a hundred in 1923, why the farmers couldn't dig them, so they just left them in the ground and let the cattle or pigs, or sheep, or horses, or anyone that wanted them, dig them out. So… we had that Depression then things got better in 1928 and '29. in 1928, and early 1929, we rented the eighty acres across the road from us, and I recall dad saying we had made more money that year than ever before the fall of '28. We'd rented this farm and I recall he said that time for farmers, in that area. Of course, at that time all of the farm work was done by horses. There were no, oh there were one or two

old iron-wheeled tractors around, but very few. We never had a tractor until after I left home. It must have been around 1936 or'37 when dad bought a tractor.

BL: How much did they cost?

CS: By golly I couldn't tell you. I wasn't there when dad bought this tractor, I just don't know. I think they were probably around eight hundred dollars.

BL: My goodness, that's a lot different than it is today. Of course, for the farmer then it would have been just as much to them, wouldn't it?

CS: Well, I remember automobiles costing anywhere form six hundred dollars on up. You could usually buy a pretty good automobile for a thousand dollars in those days.

BL: Well what personally, do you feel brought on the Depression?

CS: Well, I think it was frankly over expansion of industry and over expansion on farm production in world War I. We put a lot of sub-marginal land under cropping and again we expanded our manufacturers stopped, people were laid off. Then we had the farm Depression in the 20's. then we went along through the late 20's and things picked up, but then all of a sudden in '29 things crashed and I think we had over-supplied, over-produced, and inventories were so high that manufactures had to cut back on their productions and people were laid off. So it just, to me that was the major reason we had the Depression. We had just gone overboard during the War in our expansion, and had over-produced. Then it caught up to us, and so in adjusting to the economic conditions, why one thing led to another. People were laid off and then they couldn't buy, they couldn't buy the farm produce so the farmer was in a bad way and couldn't sell at a very profitable price. It was very difficult for people to get jobs. Unless you've got people demanding what's produced, why your prices drop and people are hurt economically.

BL: How did you think the Presidency and Congress handled it after the crash?

CS: Well, of course they started that farm program, several farm programs, and finally under the New Deal they tried to control supply. Killed little pigs, and took acres out of production, trying to bring supply in with demand. I would have to admit the first AAA did show an increase of about 60 percent in prices while it was on the books. Then the court declared it was illegal, and so they passed the second AAA. Of course, out of it all, the idea was to control supply I think and bring the supply in line with the demand. In order to help WPA, the CC program, anything to get money, purchasing power into the hands of the people so they could buy the products of the farm, and thereby raise the prices.

BL: Could you tell us about how some of these organizations worked around here in our own valley?

CS: Well, I came here in '37 and, or course, things were starting to pick up at that time. But I can recall the PWA built a lava bridge across the canal down here a mile on the highway, next to the highway. Built it out of lava rock and concrete. Of course, that put quite a few men to work. The CC's came in and built a camp out in. The water tower is still there. They were used in the mountains mainly to build terracing and roads. Then on Center Street going out west of town, I can recall the WPA fellows. One of my neighbors here was working for them at that time. He would go out there day after day for, I guess they were for six months, blasting away on the lava hill out there trying to level it down to the road. That's now called the Turner road. You notice the hill is fairly well leveled out. There were projects like this around.

BL: How many men were involved, do you think?

CS: Well, in our area I imagine there would have been between two and three hundred men. Most of the CCC fellows came in from the Middle West. They were usually not local fellows. The WPA and PWA was made up pretty much of local men. They did a lot of road building. These men hauled a lot of gravel on these country roads during the Depression. They would haul on the type of wagon that had big 3x6 slats on the bottom, and then they'd pull them off one at a time and let the gravel dump. Of course, they had a few dump trucks too that they used. Mainly they were just trying to make work for a lot of people that were out of work. Later on, on the CCC camp during the War, Contientious been disbanded, and had come to an end so they took Contientious Objectors and put out there in Central at that camp, and the old water tank is still there. Those fellows were used for about the same thing. They were used to work on roads and things like that.

BL: What did people do for entertainment? You mentioned the Charleston on the list you wanted to talk about.

CS: Oh boy! Well, there were lots of dances. It was customary during the 20's to have Saturday night dances. That was just taken for granted that we from the farm would go to the city into the ballrooms and dance on Saturday nights. We just took that for granted. I might say there was quite a lot of fist fighting too at those dances. Particularly when some of those fellows would drink a little bit, then they'd think they were real tough and we had some pretty bloody craps at times. Had one fellow killed I remember one Saturday night in a fist fight. They weren't too good that way; however, things like that usually developed outside the ballroom. Inside the ballroom, if you stayed in there and minded your business, why usually you had a lot of fun. We had live orchestras, I can remember Hosie Stout had a real nice ballroom and had his own orchestra and played for many years there in Burley. I like to dance too. When I went to the University of Washington we used to do lots of dancing the same way. On either Friday or Saturday nights, we'd usually go down to the Trionon Ballroom and dance. When I was in Salt Lake later on, why we went to the Coconut Grove down there that we went to quite often. Lots of dancing for social life. Then we used to have lots of ball games. I have to admit it I broke the Sabbath quite a bit I guess. We used to have a league that played every Sunday. My brothers were great ball players. My dad had been an ambidextrous pitcher

down in Layton in his teens and early manhood years. So we grew up with a baseball in our hands, and all of my brothers were great baseball players. Two of my brothers made the University of Idaho baseball team. Then they played on the Burley town team for a long time.

BL: I believe that's about it, if there is anything else you would like to talk about?

CS: Well, not in particular except that when I went to Henegars and my sister dropped out of the picture through marriage that threw me more or less on my own. Of course, I had returned from my mission in '33 and we were down there in '34 and '35. In the fall of '34, my girl friend showed up there at Henegars, at least this little blonde girl. She was a pretty good student. I was teaching then full time, so I walked her home one night and on the way home we stopped at a Confectionery, had a little conservation. I kind of enjoyed the walk home up on the Avenues of the north Salt Lake there. So I decided to keep company with her for a little while. Pretty soon it got a little bit serious, and along about Christmas time we decided that maybe we were meant for each other. We got married on December 23,1934.

BL: Were you still teaching school after you got married?

CS: Well, I had a pretty tough go of it too to make a living after we got married. I rented a little place out of 33rd South and 3rd East in a chicken coop there for about five hundred chickens plus a little land for a garden which I enjoyed taking care of in raising garden produce. Then my wife and I took care of these chickens and sold the eggs of Rowlios as I remember. I borrowed money on my life insurance. Then I got a job when I went back the University in 1936. I got a job up there under the NYA program in the President's office. There were two or three of us students that worked in there. He was a real fine man, quite sympathetic to us, treated us very well. I got twenty dollars a month from that job. Of course, twenty dollars then was, it would be equivalent to about a hundred dollars a month now. So it worked out pretty well. Two of our children were born in Salt Lake, then we came up here. Of course, since we've been up here, we've been able to live and made a pretty good living.

BL: Well Mr. Simmons, I'd like you to know that you taught me how to study. That government class was a good thing for me. I really enjoyed that class and I learned how to study, and I was surprised at all the things I remembered. I'd like to thank you for helping me out on that.

CS: Well, this is one of the rewards of teaching. Even though in Administrative work now at the present time, I still enjoy the teaching part of it more than the Administrative part. I like that face to face contact with students, and I'm glad to hear this report. I've had several say this that their government class had helped then particularly in their Political Science classes in college.

BL: In my Sociology classes it's even helped quite a bit. Thanks very much.

CS: I hope you get a good grade out of this now. If you don't, I'll be at fault won't I?

BL: I think it will be just fine. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College, the David O. McKay Library, and there it will be for other students and future researchers to us.