

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Clyde Calaway-Experiences of the Depression

By Clyde Calaway

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Box 1 Folder 23

Oral Interview conducted by Kenneth A. Brown

Transcribed by Sarah McCoristin February 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. I am Kenneth A. Brown, and today is the sixth of December, 1975. I will be interviewing Clyde Calaway, and the general topic will be on the so called "Great Depression."

Kenneth A. Brown: First, Mr. Calaway, what is your address here?

Clyde Calaway: Rexburg, Idaho. 361 South 2nd West. I've lived here in this place since '64. Prior to that time I lived north of Rexburg out on a ranch that I still have. Raised a family out there. Bought the place in '24 and lived there until we moved to Rexburg.

KB: Where were you born?

CC: I was born in Marysville, Utah. December the thirteenth, 1902. When I was seven years old we left Marysville and moved to Idaho where we lived at this present time with my dad. We came up here with horses. We had a team of horses on a white-top buggy, and four head of horses on a wagon with springs under it, and a saddle horse.

We landed here in 1910, and I've been here in the radius of this country place of a hundred miles ever since. And I've lived in the valley here since 1924 when we bought the place out there.

I was married in 1922 on the twenty-fifth of October. The wife and I lived together almost fifty-two years, then she had a heart attack and passed away in 1974, on the seventh of August.

KB: You said you had a ranch. What type of things did you grow on your ranch, or raise on your ranch there?

CC: On the ranch out there I used to raise beets, potatoes, hay and grain, cattle, and sheep.

KB: During the depression, did you have trouble selling what you raised?

CC: Well, during the depression, nobody had any money. However, the people that had fair jobs had a little money, but not much. But the farmers had quite a struggle. I've sold pigs at a dollar and a half a hundred. I've sold cows; but Durham cows, fifteen dollars a head. In fact, I sold seven head for one hundred and fifteen dollars one time. I sold eggs, three dozen, for a quarter; butterfat, twelve cents a pound; wheat, thirty cents a hundred, not a bushel, thirty cents a hundred.

KB: I've heard that some people in this area, where they had big farms like that, they couldn't sell what they had, so they had to destroy it. Did you ever have to do something like that?

CC: I didn't destroy any, but we tried to make the best out of what we could. But cattle and sheep, there's a neighbor out there that when the new program came on, the

government paid him a dollar and a half a head for the hides. Then he could do whatever he wanted to do with the meat. He gave everybody in the country a mutton if they wanted to come and get it, but he had to have the hide to turn in. During the depression, the government would pay, I don't remember exactly but I think it was a dollar a head for new-born pigs, and then they sent people around just to slaughter the pigs to get rid of them. Pigs up to fifty, sixty pounds. Then calves, they paid you to kill the calves, a couple of dollars a head.

When we bought the place, we paid a hundred dollars an acre for it, eighty acres. Then we was doing pretty well on the farm until the depression hit. Then you couldn't pay your taxes, you couldn't pay the water assessments, you could hardly make a living. We had some incubators and we raised chickens, hatched chickens, and sold them for four cents a piece. Then as time got a little better, we got five and six cents out of them. We didn't raise a lot, but we had to do whatever you could to make a living.

To give you an idea, we bought a piano from a moan by the name of Larsen here in Rexburg. He was in the music business. We paid four hundred dollars for the piano, and we was to pay six and half a month on it. Times got so rough that we couldn't pay the six and a half. I told him I couldn't pay for it, he'd have to come and take it back. He said, "I don't want it," He said, "I've got too many pianos that's been returned." So I had a bunch of pigs running loose there and he said, "What'll you take for these pigs?" I said, "They're not worth selling." He said, "I'll allow you twenty-five dollars for these pigs on the piano." I said "Take them." That was really a good investment for me because through keeping the piano, I have three daughters that's all musicians. Through those being able to play the piano, and through them being musicians, I have some exceptionally good granddaughters that's musicians, through keeping the piano. So it was well worth the struggle to keep it.

KB: Did you have a car during the depression?

CC: Yes, I had a car during the depression. I guess I was more fortunate than a lot of them. You couldn't buy, a lot of people didn't have the money to buy license plates. But I happened to be fortunate to have them, and I loaned those license plates, which was against the law, to my neighbors around so they could drive their car to town to get groceries and things they had. I remember one time coming to town, one of my neighbors borrowed the license plate, one plate, to put that on the back of their car, and I drove in later in the day, and happened to park right by the side of the car that had my license plate on. So there the two plates was on the different cars at the same time. But it was a common affair; everybody did the same thing because nobody had any money.

I remember one time, standing talking with some men, there was four or five and a man come up and he says, "Here's that five dollars on the bill that I owed you." He said, "Well, good." So he passed it around, that five dollars paid twenty-five dollars bill, and the guy got it back. It just went around in a circle. There wasn't any money.

KB: Did you have trouble getting tires and gas and things like that for you car?

CC: You could've bought them if you'd had the money, but during the war times tires was rationed and you had to get requisition to get a tire.

KB: What kind of things do you think might have caused the depression? What did you think at the time might have caused it, or what do you think now?

CC: Well, really I don't know what caused the depression at that time. There seemed to be a surplus of everything, and no work around. It always used to be that when farm commodities when on the rocks, there was no demand for them, that everything else did. I think it'd be that way the same if we wasn't living in inflationary times. But you've always got plenty of money as long as you're borrowing it and that's what the government's doing, that's the reason they've got money. But I was never able to borrow myself out of debt, and I don't see how anybody else can.

KB: What did you think of President Roosevelt at the time, and his new deal? Do you think it helped?

CC: It was a lifesaver to the nation. Banks was going broke and taking what little money that people did have. When Franklin Roosevelt went in, he closed all the banks down and found out what kind of footing they was on and then those that was strong enough, he opened up, and those that weren't, he kept them closed but nobody lost any money in the banks after he got to be president.

He started the program of helping people out, or doing away with some of the surplus. I remember on time, however, I don't approve of that, but they burned wheat for coal. Instead of using coal, they burned wheat. But you had more than you could use, more than you could do with, more than you could ship out. Why it seemed like there was a surplus everywhere.

KB: What kind of things besides gas and tires were hard to get a hold of n the depression?

CC: Well, there seemed to be most anything that you needed, you could get it if you had the money to buy it. But there was no money. I remember feeding cattle that winter for a dollar a day, and glad to get it. When the depression was on, the young people wouldn't know about it today, but they used to cut hay and rake it, and then bunch it by hand, then haul it on team wagons, you'd just stack and take it off with a Jackson Fork and a derrick. I worked. I worked for a team and wagon, and pitched hay for a dollar and a quarter a day, and glad to get it.

KB: Can you think of any other ways that the depression might have affected your family directly?

CC: Well, the only thing I can say about that is, the people that lived during those depressions when money was hard to get a hold of and things was tough, it kind of left a

bearing on them till they realized the value of money. They don't spend it like the government does now, like it was water and there's plenty of water and there's plenty more where that came from. But it made them a little more cautious about the way they spend money, and what they do.

When the school lunches started in those times, times was hard. I happened to be on the School Board. School lunches when we started those out, cost the kids two cents a day. Some people in the school district would go up to the schoolhouse and make chili beans or something. The government furnished some of the commodities, but they didn't have to pay for having people to help them to serve the lunches. But now they kind of got out of control, I guess. I don't know.

KB: So I guess your family probably didn't really go hungry though. They probably had all the food they needed.

CC: No, we always had plenty to eat, maybe not the best of everything, but we was always fortunate to have plenty to eat. We didn't go short of clothes nor anything to eat, but there was a lot of people in the community that did. We lived on a farm. We had cows and chickens, we had milk and butter and eggs, and flour and meat. About the only thing we had to buy was a little soap and sugar and salt, a few things like that.

KB: I heard that sugar was hard to get. Is that true? Did you have any trouble getting sugar?

CC: Yes, sugar was hard to get, it was rationed. You was only allowed, I don't remember, just so much per capita, for each person. It was a little hard to get. However, we had sugar on hand when it come so we never suffered very little for sugar.

KB: You said other people in the community had a harder time. Did any of your relatives have to leave home because their family couldn't afford to feed them?

CC: No, I don't know of any in my family or any of the neighbors out there that had to leave home on that account. We lived in a farming community and everybody was just about the same fix. But some of the people that lived in town, I know, had a rougher time than we did. We didn't have to pay rent or anything, however, we was buying our farm, we couldn't pay the water assessments and taxes, and the mortgage company paid them to keep them up. Come out to the place one day, a representative from the company. When I seen him I said, "Well, the farm's all yours, take it." He said, "We don't want you to pull off." He said, "You're doing as well as anybody else, and better than a lot of them. Just stay where you are and we'll see you through." They did, they was very reasonable and very decent.

After the depression started to ease up a little bit, I started to dry farm a little bit. The first crop I sold, the first crop I got, it just barely raised enough to plant. A man by the name of Clapp lived over in Sugar City, and he let me have a bushel of wheat in the spring for a bushel and a peck back in the fall. I just raised enough that year to pay him

back, and plant some fall wheat for the next year. Then the next year, I raised a crop and I told the elevator when wheat come to forty-three cents a bushel to sell it. It never did hit forty-three cents. It jumped from forty-three (he meant forty) to forty-five and so he didn't sell it. I saw him a couple of weeks later. I said, "Well, I've been looking for a check in the mail for that grain." He said, "It never did hit forty-three," he said, "it hit forty-five so I just kept it." I, later on, sold it for sixty, no, forty-eight cents a bushel I got out of it that year.

But then things started looking up a little bit, and things was better. I finally got a loan on the farm out there from the Federal Land Bank. I was paying eight percent interest. I finally got a loan from the Federal Land Bank and part of it was three and a half, and the other part was four, and that helped out a lot and we was able to pay off. Finally I got the farm paid for and it's never been encumbered since.

KB: Did you think that during the depression, were people more friendly at the time, or if a guy came up and wanted a meal would you give it to him at the time? Was it more hospitable at the time than it is now?

CC: Yes, it seemed like everybody tried to share and share a like. Everybody was in the same fix. Nobody had any finance, and people was up against it, and everybody tried to share and help around. There was a good community feeling.

People went to timber and hauled out wood. A lot of the people around, not a lot but a few, I happened to be one of those few that had a circle saw, power saw. We'd go around to all the neighbors, they'd get wood out and we'd saw their wood up in stove lengths for fifty cents a cord. That don't sound like very much, but then fifty cents would buy quite a bit more in them days too than it would now. So you was grateful for whatever work you could do or what you could get.

KB: did you have any relatives in the city, for instance, that couldn't afford to live there so they came to your place?

CC: No, I didn't have any relatives that come and lived with me. I had some that got kind of hard pressed but then everybody was in about the same fix. Oh, there a few that had money but it seemed like in those times, that the more you had the more real estate you had, the worse off you was. That kind of leaves a mark on you that you don't forget in a day or two.

KB: I've heard that that's part of the reason that a lot of the older generation, so to speak, places more value on money and sometimes kids can't understand why their parents are so concerned about the money. I guess that would kind of leave a mark on them.

CC: That's true. I know a man that's a millionaire today that crawled around on his hands and knees, worked at weeding gardens and so on. He still lives quite moderate. He says he can't forget those days. Even though he can afford a lot better, he lives plenty

good enough, but he is still not like the people that's grown up and had a silver spoon in their mouth all their life. He still remembers the bad days.

Thank you, Mr. Calaway for letting me interview you.