

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Elsie Petersen-Experiences of WWI

By Elsie Petersen

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Oral Interview conducted by Mark Leonhardt

Transcribed by Kurt Hunsaker November 2004

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This is Oral History. I am Mark Leonhardt. Today is December 16, 1973. I'm going to interview Mrs. Elsie Peterson. The general topic will be her impressions of World War I.

ML: Mrs. Peterson, where were you born?

EP: I was born in Elsmore, Kansas.

ML: When did you move to Rexburg, Idaho, in the Snake River Valley area?

EP: In 1906.

ML: Where were your parents born?

EP: My mother was born in Jackson County, Missouri.

ML: Where was your father born?

EP: My father was born in Elsmore, Kansas.

ML: How long had he been there? Wasn't that where you were born?

EP: Yes. He'd been there all his life until he came out here. He must have been 60 when he came out here.

ML: Is he a farmer?

EP: Yew. He has been a farmer all his life. In Kansas he farmed corn and broom corn.

ML: Did he move to Rexburg to change his farming styles?

EP: We first moved from Eastern Kansas to Western Kansas. We stayed there about a year, and from there we moved from Scot City, Kansas, to St. Anthony. St. Anthony was a county seat at that time. This is all Fremont County.

ML: Did he have a dry farm up in St. Anthony?

EP: He homesteaded a dry farm back up there in the Comville area between the Teton Basin and Newdale.

ML: How big was his farm?

EP: 360 acres

ML: And that was wheat farming?

EP: All wheat farms at that time. All of that was wheat land.

ML: How many brothers and sister did you have?

EP: I have four brothers and thee sisters.

ML: During the First World War, did you have any brothers who were aged to be drafted into service?

EP: One brother, my brother older than me.

ML: What was his name?

EP: Joseph Ard.

ML: Where was he drafted to?

EP: Well, let's see. They, the county seat was in Driggs then. And he went from Driggs, Idaho. That's over in the Teton Basin. There was a whole train load of those boys at that time.

ML: Was this right after they declared was in February of 1917?

EP: Well, this was around in August of 1917. War was declared earlier. This was the latter part of July or August-sometime because just a little while before the harvest time.

ML: He got drafted before harvest?

EP: Yes.

ML: I bet he felt good about getting drafted before harvest?

EP: He didn't have nothing to do, because he was out in boot camp at the time.

ML: who took over his position?

EP: Oh, we girls did most of it.

ML: How much of the work did you do yourself?

EP: Well, I sewed the sacks on my father's part of it. My father and the two older brothers farmed kind of together. They had one big harvester to do it all, and then each one had their smaller machinery to do their own; but when it came harvest time, they all worked together.

ML: How many people did it usually take to harvest?

EP: Well, there was on that machine, it took the driver and the header man and the machine man and when we girls worked on it, it took two of us to sew the sacks and change them and...they called it jig the sacks. Jig means to shack them down so that they hold more, you know, solid in

there and the jigger would change the sacks and turn them around to me, and I sat there and just sewed them.

ML: How long did it take you to sew them?

EP: Oh, about three seconds. Not very long.

ML: Oh, fastest hand in town?

EP: No, fastest on the hill. It doesn't take long. I don't know if it was three second or not. I never timed myself.

ML: How big were these jigs? I mean the sacks?

EP: It weighed 150 pounds.

ML: they weighted 150 pounds?

EP: they called them jut sacks. Jut bags, that's the name. And they were big ones. I think it was 150 pounds.

ML: How did you feel about having to do your brother's share of the work?

EP: Didn't hurt me a bit.

ML: Did you enjoy yourself?

EP: Well, sure, I just worked right along with the rest of the men. My little brother jiggered the sacks, and he turned them around. He didn't lift them. We couldn't lift them. We'd just scoot them around on the platform. I'd just hold them right between my knees and sew them up.

ML: Did a great number of people have to go through this to fulfill the work forces?

EP: Yes. I think that most of the people did in harvest time to save their crops.

ML: Do you know many people who didn't have enough people to work for them?

EP: We girls were offered jobs, but Dad wouldn't let us take them because we were still kids yet. There were a lot of them that said they couldn't get help to help harvest the crops, but someway they all managed. Idaho produced a lot of wheat during this time for her, and it was all good wheat. It had a lot of protein. I can't remember where it was, but it was awfully good wheat at that time.

ML: How did you like being in charge of such a responsibility?

EP: What?

ML: Working on the jigger and doing your share of wok?

EP: Well, I never though anything about it. I thought it was something we had to do. It is part of a family affair. If one couldn't do it, somebody else had to.

ML Did the governor of Idaho provide any means for people who didn't have enough family to help them?

EP: the governor didn't. They just went downtown and hired whoever they could get that would help. Some were lucky enough to get men that would work, and some wouldn't, and that's when the IWW was formed.

ML: What's the IWW?

EP: I Won't Work. And they'd go up on the farm, and they wouldn't work. There's people just like it is now that's against the government helping other people. It's the same thing.

ML: How were your feelings toward these IWW people?

EP: We didn't want them around. Just a bunch of bums. Anybody that would join and IWW wouldn't work, and they were no good. For people that have to work to make a living, we don't want them around. They're no good.

ML: Idaho sent a great many people to the war, I understand.

EP: Well, down in the more populated areas of Idaho into the cities where it was better settled.

ML: Was Boise a big area?

EP: Yes, it was a bigger community at that time, but up her in the Snake River area, it wasn't thickly settled and were few and far between.

ML: Did you notice any resentment towards President Wilson for declaring war on Germany?

EP: No, I don't think anybody – I never heard anybody say any bad harsh words about him.

ML: He was a good president, wasn't he?

EP: I think he must have been a real good president' and was using to the best of his knowledge to do the right thing.

ML: Was it Governor Moore who was governor that time?

EP: C.C. Moore, I think it was.

ML: Did he work well with President Wilson?

EP: Well, I think C. C. Moore was a Republican and President Wilson was a Democrat. President Wilson died right at the end.

ML: Right after the end, wasn't it?

EP: Was it? Had the war been declared – the Declaration of Independence been signed then?

ML: When was the Armistice signed?

EP: The 11th of November.

ML: Who succeeded President Wilson?

EP: President Harding, I think, was his Vice-President wasn't he? I think he was.

ML: Was there a big to-do about President Wilson's death?

EP: Well, it was. All the flags were put at half mast, you know, and it was a sad affair because we didn't know how the Vice President had to take over and what the next would be, but there wasn't no big to-do about it. It was a duty, see. It was his duty to take over and perform whatever might divulge upon him.

ML: How did the people feel towards agencies such as the Red Cross and other agencies that tried to help the service men?

EP: Well, they felt pretty good about it. Everybody tried to help at that time. There wasn't nobody slacking; everybody seemed to take a hold. The Red Cross was alright, but...

ML: What were your experiences with the Red Cross?

EP: Well, they came up and left wool and yarn and instructions for we girls to knit sweaters and socks. We turned them in to the Red Cross. I can't remember how many were knit. My mother knew ho to knit pretty well.

ML: Was this the first time you ever knitted?

EP: This was the first time I ever had any experience.

ML: Did you get pretty good at it?

EP: Well, I knitted a sweater or so, and my sister knitted some socks, but Ma did a lot of the knitting. She could do it faster than we could. She'd sit there and tell us hot to do it. Then we'd follow instructions. Oh, we didn't knit sweaters with sleeves. We'd knit these little vests in grey. Color wasn't khaki then, it was dyed grey. Grey sweaters is what we'd knit for them.

ML: Do you thin they bleach that, I mean, dyed it or what?

EP: No, it was dyed grey. That was the color of it, and grey socks. Now they're all khaki, see, Even khaki towels.

ML: It's prettier.

EP: Well they're done that way, so they're camouflaged, see. Khaki blends with the earth, and there's a camouflage to it, but grey or lighter colors will show up.

ML: Did you send your brother some of these knitted socks or anything?

EP: Well, no. I'll tell you. We'd just turn them back in to the Red Cross. They weren't ours. They furnished us with the yarn, and we did the work, and we turned them back in. This lady came back and picked them up.

ML: Where was your brother at during this time he was in the service?

EP: Well, he went to Camp Lewis, Washington, at that time for his boot training. I guess that's what you call it now. I think he was there about three months, and then he went to Camp Kearns, New Jersey. I think it's New Jersey, Camp Kearns.

ML: How long was he in Camp Kearns?

EP: Well, he³ was there quite a little while. Well, if he'd been out there three months, say he went the first part of August or the latter part of July. Let's say July. August, September, and October he was in Camp Kearns. Well, they mustered them out, and they were loaded on a boat, and I believe my soul it was that big ship. Oh, I thought I'd never forget that. Let's see, the St. Mary.

ML: You mean the Queen Mary?

EP: Yes, I thin they were loaded on the Queen Mary. She was a new boat at that time, and three or four of those fellows got quarantined for measles. Some of them broke down with measles right there as they was loading them on the boat, and they were all quarantined for 21 days, and by that time the Armistice was signed. He never got to go overseas at all, and he was disappointed because he had it all laid out that that whole outfit, they were going to go overseas and what they were going to get to see and all of this, you see. The older countries.

ML: Did he enjoy his travels?

EP: Yes. They were an enlightenment and experience that he'd never head, see. Most of the boys at that time was that way. We never got out and run around like they do now. Hitch-hike all over the world. The fellows didn't do that at that time. They stayed home and worked.

ML: Did it produce a good effect upon him to be able to travel like that?

EP: Well, I think it's educational and a good experience up-to-date.

ML: Did he have any trouble coming back and re-adjusting?

EP: Oh no. There was not trouble there. He just come home and went to work on his dry farm over there on the Teton River.

ML: How did your father feel about the war?

EP: Well, he never said much about it. He always thought a lot, but he didn't say much. He had enough to do, I guess, to manage the rest of the farm.

ML: Did you produce well during this time?

EP: Oh yeah, we always had good crops. We had thirty-five bushels to the acre, and we got about fifty cents a bushel for it at that time. Dad said he could always afford to raise wheat at fifty cents a bushel, but it got so that the overhead was more, see. You couldn't do it in latter years now.

ML: And you get more for a bushel of wheat now.

EP: Well, you're supposed to but there for a while we're not getting enough for a bushel compared with machinery that they have to put out on their land to operate these farms.

ML: What were you mother's feelings concerning the war?

EP: Well, you know a mother's a mother, and it's all a home affair. Like all mothers, they are all sympathetic with each other and it's a bad joke. No mother wants to give up her son.

ML: Were any of your brother's friends get into the service? Into the actual fighting situation?

EP: Oh yes. The Elton boys and several of them Robinson, Nelson, oh I can't think of them now.

ML: So they got to travel, too?

EP: They got to go clear over into France and Germany. All of them. It's beautiful over there.

ML: Did you get to talk to any of these men when they came back?

EP: Oh yeah.

ML: How were their feelings about the war?

EP: They didn't want no more of it – those that went over there and fought. They never had the equipment they have now. They went out and fought rifle to rifle, you might say. More like the

Revolutionary War. Look each other right in the eye. Yes, I think they did have some big guns such as Big Bertha and Machine guns.

ML: Did you get to hear a lot about the war?

EP: No sir. The boys never said very much. They just say they don't want no more of it.

ML: While your brother was in the war, was it easy to get reports of the war?

EP: No, because we don't have communications like we do now. Listen, we never had radios and at that time, we never had a telephone. I don't know. Something happened to our telephone line.

ML: How did you hear about Armistice?

EP: Well, it come up to the post office, and some of them down around where they had telephones. It was all spread like that. The closest telephone to our house was about six miles.

ML: What were you doing when the Armistice was signed? Or, how did you find out about it yourself?

EP: Well, I went down n to the Post Office to get the mail and that was a whole hullabaloo down there. You know it was kind of a little community Post Office, and they were all talking about he Armistice. They rand the school bell, and it was a beautiful bell though. It would ring all over the country. One of the men or boys went up on the hill where they'd been thrashing an old fashion thrasher steam engine, and they pulled the whistle down, and it blew all evening. Blasted and just railed off from it. I think somebody went up there and kept putting in more fuel to keep it a whistling.

ML: Was it a big celebration?

EP: Well, as big as you could call it big. Everybody felt the emotion of the thing. We're few and far between and then the fall of the year.

ML: I guess there was a little bit of snow then.

EP: About four inches of snow on the ground.

ML: Did everybody have a good feeling now that the war was over? Were they glad it was over?

EP: Oh yes! They were glad it was over, and they hoped that another one never would come, but in twenty years we had another one.

ML: How did they work to keep war from coming again?

EP: Well, I don't know how the government managed that, but we didn't have one break out. For one thing, everything went along smooth till the Japanese boiled over, you know in World War II. The Armistice was signed. Germany went back to their business. They were licked.

ML: What about President Wilson's proposal for the League of Nations?

EP: Well that's right, he did make that and then all countries would have to sign it. All of them didn't sign it at that time if I can remember correctly.

ML: This didn't work out as good as he had hoped it would.

EP: It was proposed, but it wasn't brought to the light like it is now. Now it's going strong.

ML: Was everybody in opinion that the War was a good War? Was it worth fighting for? To protect our rights as Americans?

EP: Well, we had to protect our rights on the oceans and also protect our exports and imports and that's one thing on the seas we had to keep our waterways open. But it never was congested like it was the second War.

ML: I guess there were a lot of hard times during the war for a lot of people who couldn't get people to work for them during the war?

EP: No, there wasn't anyone around, because they took all the boys that were twenty-one in a small area like that at that time we didn't have the population that we have now, and we hardly did labor because everyone was doing their own work, you see.

ML: Were you impressed with the War: Did you have any good feelings for the War, things that happened to you during the war that you really enjoyed? Besides sewing you jigs?

EP: Oh, we got along alright. We were just kids and we didn't realize just what it could have been. Maybe we had better put it that way.

ML: You were about eighteen or nineteen during the war?

EP: Seventeen.

ML: that put you in a lot of hard work at that time.

EP: We just kept busy. We went to school in the wintertime and worked in the summer. If we weren't hauling water, we were doing something else.

ML: How often did you have to haul water?

EP: Every other day. The tank must have held about four or five hundred gallons of water. It took four horses to pull it.

ML: Did you drive the team very often?

EP: Yes, I can drive four head anytime. We had a pump on our tank, and then my little brother hauled water all the time. Of course, I'd have to drive because he was too little. We'd stand on it, and one would pull this way, and one would pull that way. But most of the time I had to dip it in a big bucket, draw it up out of the well, hand it up onto the tank, and my brother would have to pour it in. The tank had a hole in it in the top about two feet square.

ML: Did you every go swimming or anything?

EP: Oh no, they weren't big enough. They had covers over them. There was only a hole two feet square on top.

ML: Oh, I wondered if you ever jumped in it or anything?

EP: No, water is too precious for that.

ML: Can't take a bath in it or anything?

EP: Oh no, we drink it. We had to take a little water and have a bath; then scrub the floors, and that ain't no joke. There was thirty head of horses and the cows to haul water for and everyday it took that big tank of water.

ML: You used your horses in great deal or your harvesting, didn't you?:

EP: Well, our harvester had twenty-four on it.

ML: What kind of harvester did you have?

EP: An old-fashioned Holt. An old Holt Thrashing Machine. An old separator. And it didn't have an engine to turn the separator. I was all horse power, drawn by horse power. No engine on it. Now they have engines on them, and they have tractors to pull them.

ML: A tractor isn't as hard to drive as twenty-four horses.

EP: No. Oh, they weren't hard to drive. You only had to lines to drive them with. You drove your four leaders, and that's all. The leaders pulled the hitch, and when the hitch moved, all the horses had to go, too.

ML: After harvest was there much celebration?

EP: Harvest? Oh, not to speak of. It was always a good thing to get the wheat in the sacks and hauled to the elevators. They had to haul in the wintertime on bob sleds.

ML: Did you drive them too?

EP: Well, I could. I didn't, because the boys hauled it off down here to St. Anthony. That was the way they hauled the wheat. I don't know. That was transportation in those days, horse power. They didn't have trucks and all this stuff.

ML: What was the schooling during this time? Did it hamper you schooling any?

EP: Our school was in the wintertime, and so it didn't interfere. Usually it started the first of September.

ML: When you brother got back, he didn't have any trouble with getting back into what he had left, I understand.

EP: No, he just went over there and took over his dry farm and went to work on it.

ML: How long after that was it before he got married?

EP: He got home in March and married in April.

ML: About a year later or a little more.

EP: A little more than a year. About a year.

ML: Well, Mrs. Peterson, thank you very much. I appreciate your help here.

EP: You're very welcome. I hope it will help you.

ML: I think so. You have a very good memory.

EP: I think I've forgotten most of it. There's been two more wars since then. There's World War II and the Korean War, and now Vietnam. There's been three wars since then. Besides war at home all the time, so there's four to face.

ML: I guess with nine kids you've always got a battle in the house. Thank you very much.