

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Ira Sperry Davenport-Experiences of the Depression

By Ira Sperry Davenport

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Box 1 Folder 28

Oral Interview conducted by Bill Ira Tietjen

Transcribed by Sarah McCoristin February 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

Bill Ira Tietjen: What's your full name?

Ira Sperry Davenport: Ira Sperry Davenport.

BT: And how do you spell your last name?

ID: D-A-V-E-N-P-O-R-T

BT: and what is your age at this present time?

ID: Eighty-three.

BT: Where were you born?

ID: At Parker, Idaho.

BT: When were you born?

ID: April 9, 1982

BT: What kind of occupation did you have during your life? What was your main occupation?

ID: A farmer, most of the time.

BT: OK. Now we'd kind of like to talk about the depression era, which is right around 1929 to 1940 is when they consider the era, I believe. Is that correct?

ID: Yes.

BT: Now, how did this era affect your farm work? Did it seem to change anything, like many people lost their farms during this time? Did it threaten you in this way at all?

ID: Well, it was very difficult during those years. Farm prices were so low, and in comparison with the cost of machinery, equipment, and all those things that it difficult to figure out a profit.

BT: Well, did this make any difficulty? Would you have had to give up your farm or would that have even helped?

ID: Provably wouldn't have helped to give up the farm because conditions were the same in every occupation. It was just difficult to make a profit in any occupation during those days.

BT: Now, during this tie a lot of people had to destroy their crops and livestock. Did you have to do this at all to try to balance out?

ID: No. No I never did that. We didn't, we didn't do that in our community.

BT: So no one around you was having to do this either?

ID: No, not that I remember of.

BT: How did this affect your family? Did your family have to change it's life style or did it....?

ID: Well, we had to..... it was difficult to live within our means, and we while, we always had plenty to eat and such as that. It was difficult for the children as well as their mother and me.

BT: What kind of difficulties? Could you go into it at all? Was there a lack of clothing or things like this perhaps?

ID: Well, we never lacked for clothing or plenty to eat. But it was very difficult to pay our bills and so forth. Sometimes we found ourselves pretty badly in debt. With the children going to school, six or seven or them, some in high school, they had to curtail their spending to almost nothing. It was difficult to live within our means.

BT: OK. Thanks very much. Now, I understand that a lot of times people that lived in the city had other occupations other than farming. Did you know anyone who perhaps lived in Rexburg or even in Idaho Falls that had more trouble during the depression than say, yourself?

ID: Well, yes. There were some who found themselves in pretty difficult conditions financially and had to live with very meager amount of food and clothing, and sometimes not enough fuel to keep them warm and so forth. But most people got along pretty good in that respect.

BT: OK. From what I've heard, I guess this area wasn't hit as bad by the depression as back East and that, and they didn't have to do as much, or didn't have as much trouble. How was the church an effect during this time? Did the church seem to help people, or was it unable to do much itself?

ID: Oh yes, during that time I was a member of the bishopric in our ward and we always, we spent a good deal of time helping people out and sometimes we had to reimburse them with the fast offerings and such as that. We'd call upon the community to donate in extreme cases to help some family that were in strict circumstances.

BT: OK. Now maybe could you explain to me a little bit about your understanding of President Roosevelt's New Deal and what he tried to do with that at that time. Do you know?

ID: Yes. I remember when President Roosevelt was for the president very well and understood the program, pretty well his program. He took the stand that while saving had always been preached as a principle to people, he took the stand that spending could help, that is to the extent that to keep money rolling, keep things moving. As is see it now, I think he was right, to a great extent.

BT: OK. Do you see any parallels with, say, what he was asking everyone to do and with, say, what the Nixon and Ford administration are doing now? Do you think they were doing much the same thing in trying to curb this problem we're having right now?

ID: Well, it seems to me we've gone to the other extreme now. Perhaps too much spending. They're trying to curb the inflation and yet improve the economic condition. I don't think they can do both. Just as soon as the economy rises, then depression rises. That's my opinion. Life these days is a lot more simple, a lot more easy especially for young people. In the days that we were talking about the depression, it was impossible for a young man to borrow to build a home or anything of that sort. But today there are government agencies to help him and higher wages and so forth. The condition is much better in that way.

BT: OK. That's pretty much all the questions that I have pertaining to it. Do you have any, perhaps experiences of you, yourself, or maybe of people you knew during the depression?

ID: Well, in speaking of myself, during those years I was fortunate that I had three different lines of income. I farmed and was in the potato business, buying and selling, and also operated a trashing machine. That helped to keep income coming in. I don't know how we could have kept our family in school and paid doctor bills or anything I of that sort. Of course, each one of these lines of income had their own period and that made it better. But during the depression when I was buying and selling potatoes, there were years when the farmer was only paid, I remember one year in particular, twenty cents per hundred for potatoes and we were paying our men, sorter men, thirty-five, thirty to thirty-five cents an hour. One competitor in the potato business, buying and selling, contracted his sorting to his men so that he could give the farmer a little better figure for his potatoes. Those men sorted up the potatoes and divided up what they could make, and most of the time they told me they made a dollar a day, sometimes not that. So it was pretty difficult but I refused to cut wages of my sorter men we got by.

BT: That sounds pretty good. When you was talking about your three occupations and you said that each one had a period, do you mean each year, each one had a certain time?

ID: Yes, of course. The farming was mainly through the summer then the trashing came, or course, at harvest time, and then the potato business was mainly through the winter, so that I had a certain amount of income coming all through the year. But some years the farming didn't pay out. We went in the red and just couldn't find, make a profit out of twenty cent potatoes and thirty, thirty-five cent wheat per bushel.

BT: And so when the farming was down then the other two businesses you were pursuing helped out. Is that....?

ID: Yes.

BT: Then when one of them dropped, I suppose the other two helped?

ID: It helped us get by. But I might say that...oh shoot, I forgot my....

BT: Train of thought.

ID: Shut if off while I think.

BT: That's okay; we can just let it run. I just have to transcribe it off the tape, anyway, so.

ID: The thought came to me then left me. I don't know probably that's about all I have.

BT: OK. Is that about all the ideas you can think of or incidents that you wanted to tell me?

ID: Beg your pardon?

BT: Is that about all the incidents you can think of that you would like to tell me?

ID: Well, yes, right now.

BT: OK. Well, I sure appreciate you.