

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Lewis Lowe- Experiences of the Depression

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January 31, 1975

Box 2 Folder 12

Oral Interview conducted by Kelly Arnold

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi January 2005

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Kelly Arnold: My name is Kelly Arnold. Today I am interviewing Lewis Lowe about the Depression. Mr. Lowe, tell us about the depression.

Lewis Lowe: My name is Lewis Lowe. I was born in east London, South Africa. My great-granddad came to South Africa in 1811. He was given a land grant by the British Government. The British Government wanted more people to settle in South Africa on account of the Dutch was settling there.

My folks came to Salt Lake City in 1908. The Mormon missionaries got Dad and Mom to join the LDS church that was the reason they came to Salt Lake. He worked for the Bamberger Line Railroad as a ticket agent.

In 1914, we moved to Nampa Idaho and rented eighty acre farm near Nampa. We farmed this farm for two years.

In 1916, Dad bought a farm near Kuna, Idaho. There were fifty-one acres under irrigation and it was in sagebrush. I can remember now how hard work it was grubbing sagebrush off the land before it could be planted into crops. We planted most of the land into alfalfa and wheat. We couldn't sell the alfalfa hay, so we had to haul the hay to Nampa on wagons and sold it to the ones owning cows. Most of the ones living in Nampa owned one or three cows at that time for their own milk. We boys, seven of us, raised a large garden. Stored carrots, beets, spuds, parsnips, cabbages, etc., in a large root cellar. We had two cisterns, one for water and one for ice. In the winter, we would cut ice and store in the cistern. The cistern was about ten feet deep and this ice, covered with straw, would last all winter. But when it didn't last, for refrigeration, we made a wooden frame, about four feet high and three feet square, covered with burlap sacks on top and on the sides. A container with small holes in the bottom kept full of water, wet the burlap and cooled everything inside. We had five or six milk cows on the farm. We raised chickens for eggs. We raised turkeys. Had two or three sows. Most all the farms raised what they wanted to eat. They even traded wheat for flour. Wheat was only worth from around fifty cents a hundred at this time.

At that time of the year, in the spring, when there were five or six bands of sheep went by our place to pasture in the hills. And us boys would always trade our dog for two or three bum lamb or lambs that their mothers didn't claim. Then the next morning our dog would be home so he could trade with the next bunch of sheep that come by for some more lambs.

In 1923, when I was fifteen years old, my mother passed away and dad was an invalid at this time. It was up to me to see that there was enough to eat, wear, and keep warm for my six younger brothers and an invalid father. We used the sagebrush, burned it in a big potbelly stove. We used the sagebrush for cooking, too. It seemed like it kept us busy grubbing brush, hauling the wood in the house. The sage would shed a lot of bark and a lot of dust and there was a lot of cleaning up to do.

Us boys walked two and a half miles to grade school. There was a canal angling towards school. We would catch muskrats going to and from school in the canal. This would make us a little money. I wanted to finish high school, but couldn't get to school until all the crops was harvested and work for the neighbors that was finished for the year. I got a dollar and a half an hour for ten hours a day for working. The teachers were good to me

and gave me extra work and examination so I could graduate. Thanks to them I was chosen salutatorian out of a class of seventeen. The school bus passed right by our door but we wasn't in the Kuna School District at that time, so they charged two dollars and fifty cents per month to ride the school bus. I didn't have the two dollars fifty cents, so I walked five and a half miles to the Kuna High School, there and back. After school in the fall, I used to stop on the way home and pick apples and prunes till dark to help with grocery bill. Before school I would mix bread and find the coolest place I could to put it so it wouldn't raise too much. As soon as I got home I would knead it down and let it rise again and then bake. Most of us only had one shirt and one pair of corduroy pants. We would have to wash these at night and iron them in the morning before going to school the next day. Mother left an old foot peddle singer sewing machine. After many tries I learned to sew and practiced. I got so I could patch shirts and parts and overalls. Sometimes it was midnight before we got things fixed up so of all us could go to school the next morning. One of my brothers always tore his britches out in the crotch. That was a tough one to fix.

We never had enough money to buy what we want, but we didn't consider ourselves poor because everybody was in the same boat. Everything we needed, we made ourselves. Sheds, barns, we fixed the house; we fixed the wagons, and machinery. We were our own veterinarian. When electricity came, why we done our own wiring for it. We used boxes for chairs and piled boxes on top of one another and used for cupboards. After graduating from high school, our neighbor rented me another eighty acres. I had a team of horses, a plow, a harrow, and a wagon. I went to bank and borrowed three hundred dollars to plant and cultivate, and harvest these one hundred and thirty acres of crops. In the fall, the wheat was made into bundles by binder pulled by horses, and the grain dried, the farmers – ten or twenty of us—joined together to help each other thrash the grain or barley or oats. This made a lot of work for the women folks to feed about twenty men. The first thrashers were powered by steam power, and coal and water had to be hauled for them. The first combines we had was pulled by horses and powered by a big wheel running on the ground. The later combines were powered by motors and then sacked the grain and dumped the sacks on the ground. That was a lot of hard work picking those up those one hundred and forty pound sacks onto the wagons and trucks. All the work then was done by hand. The beets, the grain, the potatoes, the hay, the sweet corn was even picked by hand. The ensilage was cut by hand and was put on wagons and hauled to the ensilage cutter by the silo until the silo was filled. Everything we did then was by hand and horses. The work we get done now with modern machinery is about ten times the work we got done then. But the investments were probably more than ten times as much now as it was then.

Our next door neighbor homesteaded eighty acres. Worked on the canals when they were put in before irrigation started. Later they had to haul sagebrush to Nampa to sell as firewood to get enough money to buy groceries. He mortgaged his farm after farming it for twenty years to build a big, fancy house. Hired all the work done. Three years to later the sheriff sold the place for delinquent taxes. About this time, the neighbors on the other side of us were farming one hundred and sixty acres. He had enough hogs to consume all the grain he raised. Hogs went down to three dollars and fifty cents per hundred pounds. He said, "I don't have to sell them all, I'll turn them into the field and fatten them over again." When he got them fat again, he had to

sell them for two dollars and fifty cents per hundred. This caused him to lose his place. I rented this one hundred and sixty acres, raised clover seed, red clover seed. The place raised unheard of yields of red clover seed for years. Finally I leveled the place and couldn't get the yields after leveling. Three years after I found the cause of reduced yields. The ground was flat, there were places a quarter acre in size that couldn't be wet, couldn't be irrigated. These spots were covered with alkali bees. I destroyed the bees, therefore, destroying the pollenizers for the red clover. I wasn't listening to Mother Nature. I've learned to study nature and work closely with her, especially applying insecticides and fungicides.

At this time we were milking fifty cows and feeding four hundred beef cattle so we needed more hired help. A young man came from Nampa, he was seventeen years old and he wanted to work. We told him the pay was thirty-five dollars a month and board. He said well that's fine, but I would like a horse and calves to rope. So I said well yes, that would be fine, you go ahead and work under these conditions. So he was a good worker but he practiced roping, he wanted to be a roper. He knew what he wanted to be. He practiced every minute he had in roping. He bought a horse for four hundred dollars; he paid one hundred dollars down and so much a month. I thought he was the silliest kid in forty states! His name was Dean Oliver and he won the world's roping championship for seven years in a row.

For fun we had jack rabbit drives, horse ridding, and horse racing. In the winter time, when the snow was wet and deep and damp we would run the horses and catch coyotes. We had parties, with us boys and the neighbor boys; well we formed a baseball team. We took all comers. We won most all of our games, but they didn't know that our next door neighbor was an ex-big league pitcher. He pitched for us, he was our main stay, and we did lots of swimming in the canals. In the winter time, the canals, we had to run water in the canals to fill our cisterns. So lots of times we'd skate for miles up the canals. One thing about old times was when we were working horses, we would stop our horses and rest them and visit with our neighbors across the fence. Now when we have tractors, we haven't got time to visit. With this modern machinery, we've got to make every minute count so we can pay for them. I learned the value of money in the tough good old days. I learned the joy of work, though I do appreciate the modern machinery. I learned to have fun and happiness without money. I learned thrift and economy. I still love the challenge of getting the largest yield from the ground that is possible; and watching and tending the beef herd. I wouldn't want to go back to the good old days. But I don't think they ever hurt me.

KA: Thank you Mr. Lowe, this tape will be placed in the Rick College Library to be used for research purposes.