

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

# Max Atkinson-Experiences of the Depression

By Max Atkinson

March 24, 1976

## Box 1 Folder 5

Oral Interview conducted by James A. Lilley

Transcribed by Heather Mattson      December 2004

Brigham Young University- Idaho

This is an oral history. I am James A. Lilley. This is March 24, 1976. I'm going to be interviewing Bro. Max Atkinson. The general topic will be the Depression in Idaho.

JL: Bro. Atkinson, where were you born?

MA: El Segundo, California, July 2, 1923.

JL: How long have you lived in Idaho?

MA: Most of my life. My parents were from here, and I spent most of the first ten years of my life in California, but after that I lived in Idaho.

JL: What year did you move back to Idaho?

MA: Officially in 1935, but we've been back earlier than that, 1931 and 1933 we were in Idaho.

JL: What are your main remembrances of the Depression?

MA: In California, the unemployment. People looking for job. The government hauling food in and giving it away to the people in California. The hobos, just walking around, riding freight trains, looking for working.

I remember 1931 in Idaho, when the farmers couldn't sell their wheat, couldn't sell their pigs, they couldn't sell their livestock. My grandfather couldn't sell his wheat that year. I think he was finally offered thirty cents a bushel for it, it made him so mad he wouldn't sell it for that price. In California, just mainly the unemployment, people couldn't make their house payments, and were losing their homes.

JL: Why did you move back to Idaho from California?

MA: My father was working for Standard Oil; he had been working with them since 1922. Then he lost his job, what else could you do in California. He was off the farm, he always liked the farm. I had a great uncle who was at the family farm in Lyman, where my great grandfather homesteaded, and he was losing it to a mortgage company. So my father made arrangements with him to come back and take over the farm. This happened in 1935 when my father finally took over the farm. That's where I grew up, was on this farm.

JL: How did the Depression effect living on the farm?

MA: Well, it was just substance farming, you just produced everything you needed yourself, literally. You produced your own food, your clothing often was hand-me-downs, or mother would make over other clothing for you to wear. The food was home produced. Very few people had money, money was very scarce. Wages were very low, men would work for twenty dollars a month and board and room. They worked hard, daylight till dark, for those types of wages at that time. But we had a good life, we'd had no electricity, no power. We seemed to make ends meet, and always ate good, and it seemed like we were happy.

JL: How did this effect your growing up, did you still have fun with your friends?

MA: Oh yes, we had all kind of fun. There was horses, we were always riding horses through the brush and everywhere. That was there really big thing, just the horses, just live on a horse. Of course, everyone had to work; boys by the time you were twelve, or thirteen years of ages you were man. I think I was fourteen years of age and I was following a thrashing machine all fall, filling a man's position. I had a team of horses and a wagon and from daylight till dark I worked. That was the summer I was fourteen.

JL: How did the Depression effect your schooling?

MA: I went to a little country school where there were just two rooms and eight grades. The teacher had the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in one room, and he had nearly fifty students. It took a good teacher to control that, he did quite well. On the wall right alongside him was the library of the school, it was just solid with books. I had a lot of spare time on my hands and during the school year I'd read it seemed like so many of those books on the wall. I read some of the greatest books. I remember reading "Moby Dick," and "Two Years Before the Mast." So many good books I read just waiting for the teacher to come over and take care of our class, I just read books, which is where most of my background comes from; is from reading all those good books in the spare time I had.

JL: What year did you finish high school?

MA: I graduated from high school, May 1940. I was a senior at the time Hitler invaded Poland. September 1, 1939, that was the beginning of my senior year. So when I graduated in 1940, I was out of high school. I graduated when I was sixteen. As a matter of fact, a lot of kids when they got out of high school, pastures were greener then. I had an uncle in California at the time that Hitler conquered France. I remember following it and reading about it in the newspapers about it. I was only down there for a short while and got homesick, and returned back to Idaho. I was home by July of 1940 and was back on the farm and remained on the farm until I went into the service.

JL: When did you go into the service?

MA: I went in the service July of '43, I tried to enlist in the Air Force in 1941, but my father wouldn't sign the papers. You had to be 21, or your parents' consent at that time.

I was a freshman at Ricks College, at the time of Pearl Harbor. December 7 of 1941 I was a freshman.

JL: Towards the end of the Depression, what were the conditions like?

MA: They had improved slowly. It wasn't a rapid recovery but all at once you'd find someone buying a new car or buying a new tractor. Although people were buying clothes just slowly, there seemed to be more money in circulation. I remember the great welfare projects of the 33's and 34's. Men would go out and cut willows off the canal banks and build bridges. I remember my father had a good team of horses. They needed a good team to help build a bridge and so my father made money by renting his team of horses to the government to build a canal bridge. On the pile driver, they had to pull a driver back up to the team of horses. The government seemed somehow to put money back into circulation through these welfare projects.

JL: Do you agree with most of the programs of President Roosevelt?

MA: Oh yes. When you're hungry, you turn to almost anyone. Of course, people who went through what I did thought Roosevelt was a great President. Perhaps not realizing where it would end in the welfare state, he gave us food and he gave us money. He saved the farms and the homes. So in the eyes of most people he was a great President who went through that period. He was almost, hope I'm not sacrilegious, almost a savior in some way.

JL: People would almost worship him?

MA: Well, not quite to that degree but they respected him and lived in awe of him, and thought he was a great President.

JL: What he did for the people during the Depression, would that account for his so many times being elected President?

MA: Oh definitely. He made an awful lot of Democrats. Hoover destroyed an awful lot of Republicans. Hoover got the blame for the Depression, of course. Every time something bad came out of the Depression, they would name it after Hoover; Hoover wagons, Hoover town, Hoover blankets, the stigma was associated with Hoover. Roosevelt, getting us out of it, got the honor and glory of getting us out of the Depression.

JL: How did the depression effect the kids who were coming here to Ricks? Were they mainly the kids from the area?

MA: Oh yes, they were all local. I remember from that class many of them I know are still living in this area. I know a faculty member who was my classmate at Ricks College at that time. Most of the men I knew are still right here in this area. Of course, after that year and after Pearl Harbor, of course, most of them went almost immediately into the

service. If not that year, by '43, they were nearly all in the service. My wife went to Ricks I believe in '44, and there were only four boys on campus at that time, the rest were all girls.

JL: How did the Depression effect the family in the way of entertainment?

MA: Oh, I'm sure it drew families much closer together. Now, course, living out where we are, our closest neighbor is a mile away. I was the oldest of four children. We had so many family games, especially long winter evenings. Of course, we just had kerosene or gas lights. We always played an awful lot of card games. I'm pretty good at playing cards, Pinochle, anything you want, I'm pretty sharp at it. We had uncles living with us too who were unemployed. My father had work and they would come and stay with us. Every night we'd play games to see who would set up and build the fire in the morning, and who would get out and harness up the horses and who'd milk the cows, it was all a great big fun and games to a degree. A lot of humor in some things like that. But families were closer together, there's no denying that fact, you depended upon each other.

JL: Like the series "The Walton's," is very close?

MA: That's very true. I think of that quite often, "The Walton's," which is this very same period which is this dependency of people upon their family. That's all there is to it. We always went out and gathered eggs to make a cake, we always had a lot of flour around, we always just had our own things, we didn't have to go to the store very often. I remember once, it was about a month period, I never went to the store, or to a town, just stayed home. You didn't go to the store every time you needed a loaf of bread or something you just couldn't go.

JL: So mainly it was homemade things?

MA: You bet. The games were. The brothers and sisters were always involved in games of some kind in the winter. In the summer, of course, we were working long, hard days. During winter, I remember we played a lot. No television, no radio. So you just had to make your days. I read a lot. I read a lot. I remember reading the "Pathfinders Series" of James Fennimore Cooper's. Zane Gray, I think I read nearly every book Zane Gray wrote, by kerosene and gas lights too, much of it. I learned, I mean people just depended upon each other.

JL: So the part of the Depression you lived through, and reading all those books you read, was that a help in deciding to become a history teacher?

MA: Oh, I think so. I've always tried to learn things and become intrigued by many things I've read about. I just always have read everything I could find. I was blessed with a good memory. I can remember many things. I imagine that's it.

JL: Thank you for your time. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers.

