

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Max Atkinson-Experiences of the Depression

By Max Atkinson

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MA: My name is Max Atkinson. I am 50 years of age. I was born in El Segundo, California, July 2, 1923. When asked to say something as I remember, about how I remember the great depression. We were living in California when the great depression started in 1929. I can't remember the actual stock market crash, but my father was working for Standard Oil Company, had been doing so since 1922, and I can remember his concern about losing his job in the Standard Oil Plant where he worked. They laid them off by seniority; and as the years of the depression went on, well he became more concerned, and more concerned, and finally in the very early 1935's he was let go by the Standard Oil Company. And like a lot of other people at that time, why we just had to leave California. But, I remember the government hauling huge truck loads of food into El Segundo there and just dumping it off down town, and the people going down and pawing through it and getting the oranges and the cabbages and then taking them home for food. We had been making payments on a house there in El Segundo for several years, and all at once we couldn't make house payments. And so my dad and mother decided to return to Idaho where they were first from. And so my father purchases a 1928 Dodge car, that was the first car with hydraulic brakes. We brought a four-wheel trailer called a Hoover wagon for a good reason; and one day, we piled all of our belongings in that Hoover wagon and hooked that '28 Dodge car on it, and we left that house they'd lived in for quite a number of years where we grew up. I was 11 years of age at the time, and I was the oldest of four children, and we left that house at daylight, just left the doors open and everything, just walked off and left it, a nice home too, and started at daylight for Idaho.

As you leave Los Angeles you've got some mountain passes, and that old '28 Dodge really had a struggle in low gear getting up those mountain passes getting out of Los Angeles. And then of course, going through Nevada. It took us, I don't remember how many days to get to Idaho; my memory sees like it was four or five days in that car going from daylight 'til after dark everyday, and very often in second gear, mile after mile.

DC: How fast were you traveling?

MA: Oh, at 25-30 mile an hour. The roads weren't the best, about 1935, and no freeways, of course, winding and going through all the little towns in Southern Utah. But, the trailer had a brake on it with a rope into the back window, and I being the oldest one in the family, when we had to slow down going down hills, why I was pulling on the rope. And my father was in the front seat saying, "Pull on the rope!" and then I'd pull on that and he'd use the car brakes to get us stopped, because we had a pretty good load going down hill.

On May 5, 1935, we finally returned to Idaho, out in Lyman. And we had a great uncle who was losing the farm, the mortgage company was foreclosing. And my father took what money he had and cashed in his insurance policies, and we returned to this farm; and my great uncle would turn his farm over to my father. My father later would pay him for it, but he just took over a very good farm. There was 20 or 30 head of horses, milk cows, chickens, and everything when we moved in there. The old house was about 12-inche room house, part of it had a dirt roof. It was raining when we moved in and the

roof was leaking everywhere in the house. The pump was outside the house, and there was a little house out to the back, and that's the house we moved into in Idaho.

DC: Which one, the one in the back or the one in the front?

MA: The one in the front, of course. Just shade of I don't know what, but it was very crude living. But, 10 foot ceilings in the house and in the winter, why the bedrooms were freezing. We'd get up in the morning in the winter and there would be half-inch of ice on the water bucket in the kitchen. To wash our face and hands, of course, why you'd put cold water in a wash basin, go get the tea kettle, and put some warm water in to warm it up; and you get through washing why you went outside and throw the water out the door. There was no grass growing anywhere close to the back door cause the soapy water had killed it all. It seems strange to a lot of people I guess, but my father started farming, and we did everything with horses.

DC: Now where did you start farming at?

MA: In Lyman.

DC: Lyman?

MA: Right there. Where we moved on the house right in the middle of the farm.

DC: That's Lyman, Idaho?

MA: Lyman, Idaho, just outside of Rexburg here. And I can still remember plowing with six head of horses. I was 11 years of age and 12, I was running horses, six head of horses on plows, gang plows and harrowing, all days long, and I was not very old wither. You just lived on the horseback for all summer long just herding cows. You needed some eggs, just go chase the chickens down in the barn, and find their nest before the magpies did, and find a setting hen and get you some eggs. We always had pigs, and we had our own wheat and made our own flour. It was a very crude, very primitive living, but we were happy. Everyone worked hard, and everyone was happy. We never had electricity 'til I'd left home, perhaps them in Idaho anyway, about the first indoor toilet I remember was when I went to high school. Even the grade school had a trail out the back. Those first few years were very hard. When the first fall came, why the potatoes were 45cents a hundred for number one; wheat as I recall was 45 cents a bushel, 37 cents, 45 cents a bushel, something like that; and pigs, and we had sheep too, we had a few sheep; so I grew up on mutton, and just the garden, and out current bushes and raspberry bushes; and all this. My mother canned tremendous amounts of food. We had a cellar off the house, and it was always cold in the cellar, and we always put the milk in there for the house, and it was always full of food. We just ate good and lived good and didn't spend much money. We just didn't have any to spend.

DC: You didn't have an ice box or a refrigerator?

MA: Oh heavens no, never. How can you have that without electricity? We never had a radio. We finally got a battery operated radio, and that was in 1935, first year I guess it was, because I remember I think of, listening to General Conference on it when they announced the Welfare Program, that's how I can remember that. Either in '35 or '36, when Church Welfare Program started. Because I remember them announcing it on the radio that we had at that time. But the radio used so much electricity the batteries would only last, oh it seemed like three or four weeks, and batteries were awfully expensive for that radio; and so we'd have a radio for maybe a month until we could afford some more batteries, which would usually take six months, so we had a part-time radio. And it was a great life, that's all I can say. We had a couple of pretty good streams going to the place, and a lot of fish in the streams. We always had peas in the summer time, east the peas in the field. My father was a good farmer. We always started raising good crops. He was, well, did real well on the farm. We got 300 acres there, and they did real well with it. Today it's a very valuable farm, I'll tell you.

I think one of the interested things is how little money there was around available in the area. No one had any money, in fact, the only way they could have an income was from milk checks. And we used to have the old cream separator, and separate the milk, and take the cans of cream to town and sell the cream, or else just sell the whole milk to the milkman that came around.

I keep thinking of the school teachers. Every little community had its own school district with its own school board and paid the school teachers in "warrants." And as these teachers would take these "warrants" to town, sometimes the merchants would only give about half of what the "warrants" were worth, so anybody who was a school teacher, you really weren't making very much money. As I remember the school teacher there in Lyman was a good teacher. His name was Verl Allen. As I recall, he made \$50 a month, and for that \$50 a month he lived in the back part of the school building, and he had the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades in one room, and some of the boys were bigger than he was, in the 8th grade, 15-16 year old boys. But, he was a strong enough individual that he would maintain the discipline pretty well, he wasn't adverse to walking down and grabbing a boy and smacking him real hard, because I've seem him do it a few times, and he was able to maintain a pretty good discipline this way. Every morning he read the Bible to us, and one morning he just put the Bible down and just walked down the row and grabbed this kid and just raised him up and slapped him as hard as he could and set him down, didn't say a word and just went back up to the front of the room and started reading the Bible again, just as unconcerned as could be. You don't see things like that happen very much anymore, but he handled us, that's all there was to it. And when I was in California, we had half-years, and I'd skipped a grade in school, so I was off a half-year. And when we came to Idaho, I was a year a head of where I should have been in school, so I graduated in the eighth grade when I was 12 years of age. And all the other kids in the grade were mature, and some of them actual men about that time, and I was just a little tine kid who wasn't even starting to mature yet. But, I could always keep up in school so that was no problem.

But, everyone worked together. As I remember, all the neighbors if I needed a hair cut, I never went to town to get it, we had a neighbor who lived a half mile away who just cut all the hair in the country. So periodically we'd, my brother and I, and sometimes my dad, we'd just go and get a hair cut. And I don't remember every paying him. I don't know if my dad every paid him or not, but the people just worked together. At harvest time, why everyone would pitch in and harvest, and come time to settle up in house and money, why everybody say, "Oh, just forget it, we'll get even sometimes," and very little money changed hands in those times, very little money changed hands.

My memories of it, I think it was a very good time, but it was very harsh for the parents. When Christmas would come or something like that, why it just didn't, it was different than it is today. Because I can remember one Christmas, when my father was off somewhere working trying to make come money that I being the oldest had to go get the Christmas for the whole family. And it was yup at my uncles, and I went on skies, up through the snow to my uncles house, and I carried back out while Christmas in a small cardboard box. My mother, I, and my father and the four children, that was out Christmas that year. Christmas trees, we used to go I don't know where the Christmas trees came from; but, we'd have a Christmas. And our only lights were kerosene lamps; and we finally got a Coleman gasoline lantern, and that was a wonderful thing when we finally got that. You can imagine the light that Coleman gasoline lantern would've put out.

To water the livestock, of course, why you pumped all the water by hand. Sometimes you could pump water steady for an hour before all the cows and all the horses and everything had a drink of water. There's always something special about livestock and having to need water.

I think the depression was harder on the women than anyone, especially living on a farm when there were no washing machines out where we were at. So, of course, my mother would spend hours and hours washing out clothes on the scrubbing board. Once again I being the oldest, would carry water in buckets into the great big old wash tub on the stove; and of course, we'd heat this and get the water or lift this wash tub off and put another wash tub on the and fill it full of water, each one taking maybe six or eight buckets full of water that I had to carry and pour into, and then my mother would scrub clothes for hours. And then, no electric irons, why she's have three or four big irons on the stove with a handle, and we'd just keep changed them around to iron the clothes. And finally we got a washing machine with a handle on it. That was a marvelous invention. But of course, guess who was elected to push that handle back and forth. So I'd stand there. We didn't have that one for too long. We finally got one with a gas engine on it. But, I remember standing there pushing that handle back and forth for an hour or so, working the agitator inside that washing machine. But, we finally got a, I think it was a Montgomery Ward washing machine with a gasoline engine on it. My mother really had something when she finally got that. I think she was the pride of the whole neighborhood. We lived way off of any power lines; and of course, in the winter taking a bath, in a big house like that, you could almost freeze to death taking a bath. In the winter times, we'd be snowed in, of course there was no cars; but if you had a car,

you'd leave it up on the highway somewhere. So we always had a good team of bobsleds and away we'd go everywhere with a team of bobsleds; and of course, that's a lot of fun in a way too. We went to school, we lived over a mile away from the school, and my dad would even take us in the bobsled in bad weather. Of course, that was again a lot of fun. As I said, no one had any money, and a lot of people had a way of just existing; it doesn't take much sometimes to get by.

The clothing we had during the depression was just overalls and shirts and socks and so forth; but, I remember going to high school, er, to the grade school the first year, I didn't have a coat when winter came. I had an old hand-me-down from one of my uncles that I wore that first year going to school. We picked potatoes that fall as I remember, and I made something like \$10. I can't remember the exact details, but I remember going to town and buying me a sheep skin coat, overshoes, gloves, overalls, and shirts, and had a change left, from \$10. and that, as I said, it's a little money left. Of course, we only got paid I think it was a penny a sack for picking potatoes. It was a very small sum of a pay for picking potatoes.

What else was it you asked?

DC: About the old cars.

MA: Oh the cars, my father, when the old Dodge gave out one more time, I think it was this Dodge that we just tore the body off of and took the engine out, and then put a hay rack on it and put a tounge in it, and hooked the horses to it. Of course, that was the whole thing about Hoover wagons. It was a rubber-tired wagon that was with springs, and it was far superior to the old iron-tired, dead-x wagons that would bounce and had no spring. Of course, the person with the best Hoover wagon and the best team of horses was really in style. But my father later bought a Model A Ford Truck. It was a very short wheel-based truck, but that was a real good truck at that time. And of course, hauling potatoes and hauling sugar beets al fall in that Model A was a real good thing. The we had a 1934 V8, the first V8 ford came out in '32. And they they got a V8 in '33, and we had a '34 model V8, but it was not a good car at all. We couldn't keep engines in it. But after that we didn't have a car for quite a number of years. We just had a truck that we had to haul the farm produce and things like that on. I was a senior in high school, and I think I was about to graduate, well I was out of high school, and I worked that summer. I remember taking part of my wages and putting it with my father's wages, and we bough a 1936 Plymouth, and that was a real good car too. Then we sold the Plymouth, and that was real good car too. Then we sold the Plymouth and got a 1940 Ford V8 which was a real good car.

But people didn't drive cars as much at that time for some reason, I don't know why. We had, in the most of the winter they wouldn't start. It's get down to zero, why you couldn't start a car. There were no heaters in the cars, no fast to clean your windshield off, so driving in the winter time, why you had to have a sack of salt in the car to wipe the windshield off to keep the steam of it to see where you were going. Most people just usually drove with just a hole about the size of your fists, looking through. And then

finally somebody figured out taking a rubber fan, to put on the dashboard, and this little rubber thing would keep, to a degree, keep your windshield clean, at least one the driver could see through. Of course, all the other windows would freeze solid. When they finally put heaters in cars that was a wonderful invention-improvements. When they figured out how they could use the hot water from radiators, but, something in your car, that was a wonderful improvement. But things have really changed during the years.

Back to the depression, the summer I was eight years of age, 1931, my parents sent me up to Idaho from California to spend the summer with my grandparents, who owned a dry farm east of Rexburg. And so I spent the summer up there helping my grandfather plow, and do all kinds of work, except I know when the harvest time came, he had a lot of wheat. I don't remember how many acres he had-several hundred, and the combine he had was pulled, it was 25, 24 head of horses. And I remember driving the horses, and the price of wheat that fall was so cheap, that grandfather didn't even cut all his wheat. He said it just wasn't worth cutting. And so we just cut off the very best patches of wheat and left a lot of his wheat never even cut it that fall. And I keep trying to remember just exactly how cheap a bushel of wheat got to, but it seems like it was 30 cents a bushel, that's what he was offered for his wheat. And it just wasn't worth it, because you had to haul it into Rexburg, on wagons, er, very very few people had trucks in '31, a little later on they had trucks. But I remember big old sacks of wheat dumped off in the field, and taking two people to lift them on the wagon, and everything in sacks- there was no bulk grain at that time. Hauling a whole big wagon load into Rexburg or Sugar city, not hardly getting enough money out of it to pay for the trip into town. Those were some pretty hard days, that with my grandparents, up on that dry farm, as I remember.

Another thing about this period I remember so vividly was prohibition. I remember living in California, and this man who was just about like you would picture a bootlegger was like, would come over and drop by my parents house one day, give my father a card. And after he left, I said, "Who was that?" and he said, "Oh, just a friend of mine." And, oh, it seemed like in the next week, why I had a uncle took me for a ride out in the country, where we meet this man. My uncle gave this guy some money, and this guy gave my uncle a flask of whiskey. And then my uncle slipped it into his belt, and we drove back into town; and my uncle, he did like to drink at that time. And now that is one of the experiences I had with a bootlegger. They were around everywhere; and a little bit later, I just mean, I can't quite, his first name was Nick which first him, I remember that, but he went to prison very shortly after this for bootlegging. I can remember that happening there is El Segundo. Of course, everybody was making beer in there at the kitchen sink, or making wine in jars. That was a very interesting period in that way.

Another interesting thing I remember is tobacco. There wasn't as much emphasis on at that time, but everybody smoked Bulderam. Now Bulderam comes in, if you want to initiate it, it comes in a sack and the papers come with it, and you roll your own. But everybody smoke Bauleram, my father, and my uncles who used to live out on this farm with us; and they'd get out the Bulderam and all roll their own. And finally somebody would come back from town with a package of what they called Kallermaids, and theirs

almost take them down and take away from them were a real luxury, a package of cigarettes about that time. Of course, I remember a lot of 'em chewed snooze and a lot of 'em chewed tobacco. I shouldn't say this, but even some of the good church members chewed tobacco about that time, and there doesn't seem to be the stigma associated with it as there is today.

Trying to recall some other things; of course, the foreclosures on the farms was always a great tragedy. I don't know of a farm ever actually being sold by a sheriff, but a lot of farms would have, get close to a sheriff's sale, where they'd come out and actually post it for not paying the mortgage on it; but some how or other the people could get money. Of course in the 1930's when Roosevelt's became President, about 1933-1934, farm prices did start moving upward again. By '35 and '36, with the government payments, why agriculture did turn around, and people would start buying more cars but no one had any tractors. Very few tractors on farms 'till about 1939-40. I was a senior in high school, 1940 when my father brought his first tractor. It was a John Deere Model B, and he got the tractor, and the plow, for a thousand dollars. And at that time that was just about the best tractor made, and one of the best plows made. Of course, they only had about 20 horse-power but, it was a marvelous machine, that John Deere tractor was. It would take the place of about, oh, I don't know how many horses. Of course, they'd keep it going almost 24 hours a day, because we would plow for the neighbors and everyone else, because they'd get tired of plowing with horses about that time.

For some reason during the 1930's, it just seemed like war was coming, I don't know how, I can't quite put it into words, but everyone just seemed to feel like there was a war coming. I can remember 1935 when, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. Of course, I remember listening to all about it on the radio, and everybody even then realized the war was coming. I was a junior in high school, no I was a senior, at the time that Hitler invaded Poland and even then all the young men seemed to sense that it was just a matter of time until they were in the service, and another World War was on. But, of course, in 1940, the economy really picked up. In 1940 I graduated from high school, in Rexburg, and then I didn't go in the service yet, but stayed out of school one year and then in the fall of 1941 I went to Ricks College. And so on December 7, 1941, I was a student at Ricks College. December 8, the day that Roosevelt declared war, I was in the library, on the third floor of the Spori, where it was at that time, and listened to the declaration of war message by the President. And of course, everyone seemed to sense that it was a foregone conclusion you'd soon be in the service. I was 18 at that time, and the next summer when I was 19 why, I went into the service and took my training back in Rhode Island and Virginia, and then was overseas for 20 some months in the South Pacific during World War II. Took part in four actual inactions on the hostile beaches and saw a lot of navel action, a lot of air action, and a lot of very, very interesting things. I was a signal man on the ship. One night at the Layte Gulf, as we were up on the signal bridge, why I had a one glass look me off the cruiser about a mile away from us, and I say this air plane come underneath the smoke screen, and come right low against the water and I could see it was a Japanese dropped a torpedo, and then flew back into the overcast, and it was if the torpedo hit the cruiser Honolulu blow up right before my eyes, with bodies going through the air, and then of course all the other rescue craft came over and tried to

keep the Honolulu from sinking. They finally tied a tug to it and took it over to the beach and beached it. But, I do remember seeing the bodies floating around in the ocean when they'd wrecked the cruiser Honolulu.

They were still sitting there when oh, a week or so later when I left, the Honolulu was still sitting there on the beach there at Layte Gulf. I was on the beach there at Layte, my friend said, "Let's walk down to the beach," I said, "Oh, I don't want to," it, there wasn't maybe quarter of a mile behind the beach, and so he walked off. He came back an hour later just running; he said, "You really missed something." I said, "What in the world did I miss?" He said, "I watched Douglas McArthur come ashore," He said he was standing on the beach when that landing craft came in, and he saw McArthur and the President of the Philippine Island get out of the landing craft. Had I have gone with him I'd have watched that historic event, but I missed it just that close.

I saw some, several Kamikaze planes, aircraft; they were a very fierce sight in a way. They say there's nothing funnier than a stowaway on a Kamikaze.