

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Constance R. Bidder Brown: Growing Up in Rexburg

By Constance R. Brown

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Box 1 Folder 17

Oral Interview conducted by Roberta Carpenter

Transcribed by Victor Ukorebi April 2005

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I am Robbie Carpenter and today December 8, 1975, I am going to interview Constance Brown and the general topic will be growing up in Rexburg.

Roberta Carpenter (RC): Mrs. Brown, where were you born?

Constance R. Brown (CRB): I was born in Rexburg, August 30, 1902.

RC: Would you tell us who your parents are?

CRB: My father was Hyrum Ricks Sr. the son of Thomas Edwin Ricks who was the founder of Ricks College. My father and mother married in Polygamy in Logan, Utah. Shortly after the persecution of the polygamists was so severe that Aunt Lizzy, she was the second wife, came to Rexburg, Idaho to live; and my father went on a mission to England and served there for two years. Mother took care of the store that they owned, a mercantile store in Logan, while he was gone and supported him with the proceeds of the store. They moved to Rexburg in 1896 and father, with the help of his little boys and some of his brothers, built a home in the outskirts of Rexburg on the west, southwest side. I was the sixteenth child out of the family of twenty. Aunty Lizzy's home was just east of mother's home. I grew up in that environment and I might say here that although this generation frowns at the idea of polygamy, that it's the greatest source of teaching people to be unselfish anything I know of. There was no distinction between my half sisters and I. we played and grew up together as just one big happy family.

RC: I have never talked to anyone that has come from a polygamist family before. What did your parents do, your father do?

CRB: My father was an attorney. My grandmother Bidder, who was of German descent, both grandmother and Grandfather Bidder were my mother's parents and they had settled in Logan. My mother was carried across the plains when she was a year old. Her parents were converts to the church. My father was born in Farmington. His father and mother were pioneers in the Salt Lake area. He served a term as Probate Judge at one time. The County seat was at St. Anthony and it was Fremont County, before a division was made and his office was there. Father was a successful attorney and he needed to because he had plenty to support. He said polygamy was just hard on a man as it was on a woman because they had so many problems keeping everybody happy and satisfied. But we were really happy together. My childhood memories are just one sweet story.

RC: Do you remember anything in your childhood of ever not having enough?

CRB: I never recall not having enough to eat. I do recall one Christmas that my brother and I were the youngest children in my mother's family of eleven; we went to town and had a few pennies to spend for Christmas shopping. I recall I was seven, rubbing my nose or pressing my nose against the store window to see the candy and all the wonderful display because very, very seldom did we ever have a chocolate. I bought a box of candy for my father and mother for Christmas out of my meager supply, meager pennies. Because I was sure that they would share and that I'd be able to have a treat.

RC: You said your grandfather was the founder of the school? I understand that the school was in debt or almost failed, or something?

CRB: My Grandfather was considered a wealthy man at one time. He had five wives and many children. He died a poor man in 1901 before I was born. Most of the things, the money or anything that he'd accumulated went to help sustain Ricks Academy. It wasn't even a four year school, it was just eighth grades at one time. It started out with just a few grades and then increased. But they had such a struggle. Persecution was bitter against the Mormon people, apostate people. People, who had dropped away from the church, some of them had come from polygamist families and had fallen away. I never recall going hungry but I surely recall longing for some of the special things that everyone take for granted today. We always had a wonderful garden, and we had a cow and a horse and a buggy. We had to travel back and forth from town with a horse and buggy. When I was growing up, three of my older brothers served on missions and they were hard years, even though it didn't take what it takes now to keep a missionary out, it surely depleted the family income.

RC: What year were you married?

CRB: I was married in 1922. I married Jay Earl Brown. He was born and raised in Bear Lake; went on a mission to the Central States and I became acquainted with him when I went on a visit to Bear Lake to visit a sister. The years of World War 1 were difficult years. People had to buy bonds. They had to help support and give money to help the soldiers to contribute from many sources to help them, this is the service men. It was difficult all through my growing years so when we were married, I started out with practically nothing at all. They were hard times and since I had come from a big family and always been conservative, I didn't know anything else and so you just followed the pattern.

RC: When you had children did it get harder?

CRB: Well yes, as the children came along we were able to cope with the problems that existed. I don't believe when I see some of these young people struggling today that perhaps it seemed any harder to us then, than it does them now because they have to start from scratch sometimes. Having spent their time trying to get an education, some of them have gone in debt. That wasn't a normal thing at that time.

RC: Do you remember when the stock market crashed?

CRB: Yes. Rexburg had been going through a period of rejuvenation and building. College Avenue was the street, was built through and College Avenue was built and some nice homes were built along on each side of the street. New buildings, the Commercial Building, the Idamont Hotel and different buildings that we just thought were exceptionally buildings for our little town. My brother, Hyrum Ricks Jr., he was my

oldest brother, was a promoter of a lot of these improvements that took place. At one time, I think he would have been considered wealthy for the time we lived in. But he ventured farther than he should have considering the years and the times, the things that were going on. Then one night, we went to bed and the next morning when we got up the news came that the banks had closed their doors, that there was no chance to get the money, that the stock market had crashed, and that the people would have a terrible time to survive. They did and a great depression followed that particular period.

RC: Was your family directly affected, your family?

CRB: I don't believe that we realized how much we were affected. It was a struggle to pay the bills. If it hadn't been for our garden and the things that we have learned how to take care of, both for in the summer and the winter, we would have suffered. But we had learned through past experience of pioneering that you had to conserve, you had to take advantage to use every available source. When you had a new dress, you didn't wear it a few times and discard it, it had to be worn until it was sometimes threadbare.

RC: Do you remember Rexburg, like Ricks College, being affected by the stock market crash? I mean, could everybody afford to go to this school?

CRB: No, the school had a struggle for years and years and had it not been church supported I think that it would have had a difficult time to continue to exist. I do think that those trials and the years of trouble made the people cling together and they supported the school. I graduated from Ricks College in 1921, and since that particular time or as far back as I can remember, people have said that Ricks has an exceptional spirit. People have gone to Utah State, they have gone to the University of Utah, they have gone to Moscow to the University, and to Pocatello to the school there. I have heard countless people, young people bear testimony that never have they ever found the spirit that exists at Ricks. The only thing that I could contribute was that they had such trials. Oh, I remember when we put the "R", Ricks, on the Spori building, that we saved pennies for a long, long time to contribute to help to pay for the "R".

RC: Do you have any feelings about the President at the time of the stock market crash or of the New Deal or of the programs that he introduced?

CRB: There were government agencies that helped people to...oh, they made projects if it was even digging ditches or doing something that seemed perfectly senseless at the time to give people something to do. Then they paid them in turn. Many people were in this area, after the crash, they were out of work. It was employment that was scarce and hard to cope with. Many people lost everything that they had accumulated through years of struggle. They were real difficult years. It was in the early part of the depression when the church authorities first advocated the food storage program and the welfare program. The church helped. They used to ship in car loads of grapefruit, oranges, and a lot of commodities that people who were active in the church; and my husband was in the bishopric at the time and they used to deliver it all over to the people who were poor and couldn't afford the things that we feel are most essential.

RC: Do you remember any bums or hobos?

CRB: Oh yes. Ever since I was a little child, we lived next to the railroad track. They would come and they would walk the railroad track, back and forth. Sometimes there would be as high as ten or fifteen stop at a day, when I was a child, asking for, oh they would say, could they do a little work to get something to eat, but most of them weren't very anxious to work. It was a real burden sometimes to, cause mother was of the nature that she felt she couldn't turn a hungry person from her door. We also had a lot of Indians come into the area and they were great beggars and some good thieves among them.

RC: Can you tell us some of the basic commodities that you had to do without? That were short at that time?

CRB: Yes, soap was scarce. Sometimes we weren't able to buy a toilet tissue, sugar, was really scarce. In fact, sugar and shoes were rationed. We had ration stamps that, oh I recall one time I said to one of my sisters who was married, "Penny's are going to have some sheets and pillow cases in and don't you think that we'd like to get some?" She said, "Well, we got money to buy them any time." There came a time when people stood in lines for a block or two to try and get sheets and pillow cases and some very essential things. When we killed a beef or had a beef killed, we'd take care of the grease or when we killed a pig and made our own soap and we never thought of buying bread. That was the last thing we would ever thought of, buying a loaf of bread. Everything had to be made from scratch. I recall that during the depression years as our little family was growing up, that many times our main diet was cereal for breakfast and milk, and for dinner we had boiled potatoes and gravy made from putting some flour in some lard and thickening it with flour and milk. We didn't suffer but we surely didn't have luxuries that we would have liked to have had. When the authorities of the church first instituted the welfare program and asked the people to get in their supply, if it was possible, of food. I made enough soap that I thought would last us a year and every time there was a sale we purchased a case of tomatoes or something that we could change out diet a little from potatoes and gravy. Some of the neighbors were a little critical and they said well if times got any harder if you had a storage of anything you'd have to share it with someone else. It wouldn't do you any good anyway. So one year we had a flood. Yet the snow was deep and in January 21, the rain storm came and the great thaw. As the water ran off the hill like a river and it struck the side of our house like the crack of a gun, and then it filled the basement. Some of my neighbors were a little critical because we had to have the water pumped out of the basement eventually. The chickens had to be carried from the chicken coop to the barn and thrown up on the hay loft so that they wouldn't fly down into the water and drown. The neighbor down the street from us, a man and his wife and children, were brought up the road in a boat. So you know how deep the water was. People suffered extensively from that. Some of my neighbors laughed because a mile and a half down the highway the water had to come up the hill so fast that it bubbled, you know how water gets whites, and we used to call it Indian soap when we were youngsters. But it bubbled and had a lot of white on top of the water and the neighbors said that that was Brown's storage of deep floating down. For a long time, I raked up soap from the lawn

that they had to, when they pumped the water out of the basement; however, we didn't get the water in the main part of the house. We had two floods and a fire. After we had been married for a few years, our house caught fire and did a lot of damage. They were trying years but I don't think that those years were any different than people's lives are now because everyone's tested in some form or the other. Some people can't take prosperity. Some people can't take a lot of money. So they are tested to see if they'll serve the Lord. Now I know that it was really difficult for people to pay their tithing through those years but those who did were surely blessed. Given the desire and the stamina to face up under problems and difficulties and think that if they worked at it hard enough that tomorrow will be better.

RC: Well, thank you very much. This has really been enjoyable and I have really learned a lot. This tape will be placed in the library at Ricks College for use by future researchers. Thank you.